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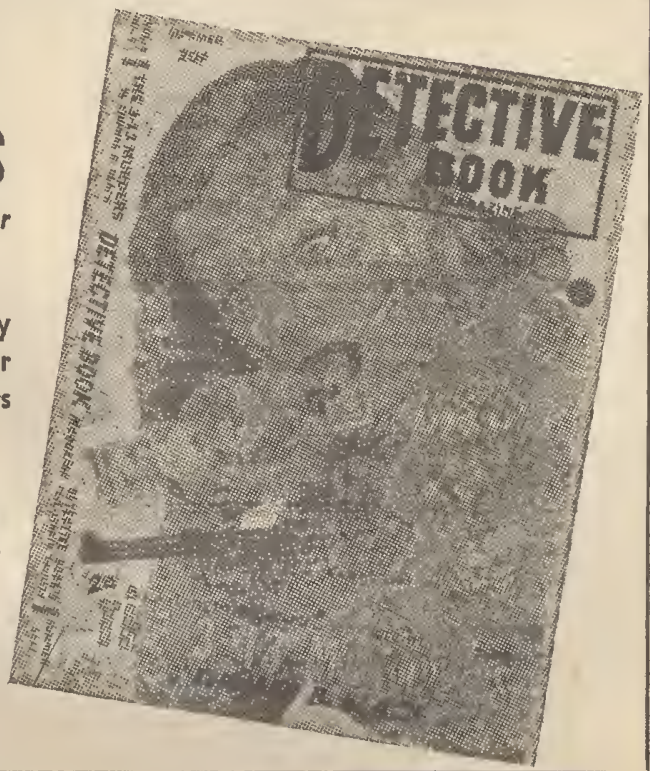

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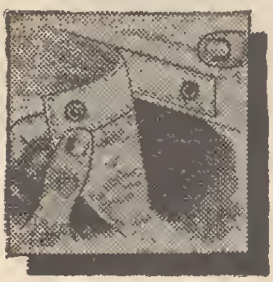

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"Leave your guns before you come aboard."

BLACK SILENCE

By EMMETT McDOWELL

Thundering back they came across cold space—eyes aching for remembered vistas, nostrils flaring for sweet fresh air, feet itching to tread on precious soil. They stepped down—into a wasted lifeless horror! Eying each other in despair, they wondered. Must they—*could* they—colonize an alien world they once called HOME?

EARTH!" SAID MATTHEW MAGOFFIN happily. "Good old Terra. Sounds wonderful, doesn't it?" Elbows on table, he sat listening to the specially-beamed broadcast from Earth. Half a dozen other members of the first expedition to Mars were also in the messroom of the Argus.

"What's first on your program when we land, Lynn?"

They had been out two and a half years, and it was a subject of which they never wearied.

Lynn said, "A bath—a real one. Not out of a tea cup." She was the expedition's photographer and reporter, a small blonde with a soft triangular face.

The music stopped in the middle of a bar. An announcer's voice broke in.

"We interrupt this program to bring you a news flash from the Union of South America."

Everyone stopped talking in the messroom of the spaceship.

"The plague area in the Andean region is spreading out of control. Disease characterized by minute black spots that appear all over the body from head to foot. The spots are accompanied by a high fever and followed in two to three hours by death."

"Whew!" said Matt to the company at large. "What a disagreeable way to die! Wonder what causes it?"

As if in answer to his question, the announcer on Earth said, *"To date, the germ has not been isolated. And all attempts to curb the spread of the disease have proved futile.*

"The Pan-American League is meeting now in Lima to consider segregating the entire Andean area where the plague is raging . . ."

There was an interruption. Everyone in the messroom was tense, conscious of blurred background noises in the far away studio toward which they were flashing.

"Here's a special bulletin!" The announcer's voice sounded frightened and excited. *"Marseilles, Liverpool, Hong Kong and San Francisco report . . ."*

The speaker went dead.

Matt Magoffin found himself holding his breath, waiting for the news to come back on. But it never did.

After a minute's silence, he leaped to his feet. "Damn that operator! I'm going to see what's wrong."

He started for the starboard passage, a babble of voices breaking out behind him. Matt was a stocky, powerfully built man in his thirties, the expedition's palaeobotanist. He reached the starboard ladder, ran up to the control deck and shouldered into the radio shack without knocking.

"What's up?" he demanded of the operator, a thin freckled youth who was staring at the banks of equipment in perplexity.

Sparks knit his brows.

"Nothing—that I can find."

"What!"

"There isn't a damn thing wrong at this end. The broadcast was interrupted. Power failure, maybe."

Matt Magoffin ran his hand through his short crisp black hair, alarm in his blue eyes.

"Have you tried to contact Earth?"

"No. Not yet."

The operator sat down at his instruments, threw in a switch and spoke into a microphone.

"Argus calling Earth. Argus calling Earth. Argus calling Earth. Come in Earth."

Silence!

MATT'S JAW shut with a click. The operator tried again and again, but without success. He was still trying when the director of the expedition burst into the radio shack, followed closely by the captain.

"What interrupted the broadcast, Sparks?" the director burst out.

The operator shrugged. "There's nothing wrong with our instruments. But I can't raise a peep from Earth."

The captain said, "Um. Keep trying."

"Yes, sir."

"And report at once as soon as you establish contact."

"Yes, sir."

The captain turned on his heel and left. Isaac Trigg, the director, prepared to follow when Matt said: "Just a minute, Isaac. I'm coming with you."

The director paused, allowing Matt Magoffin to come abreast of him. "What do you make of it, Matt?" he asked.

"I don't know." Matt shook his head.

For two long years, between favorable oppositions with Earth, the expedition had been searching the airless, waterless wastes of Mars for any evidence of life. And had arrived at the disappointing conclusion that not only was Mars devoid of life, but that the ruddy planet never had supported life in any form.

But during the two years they had been in daily two-way communication with Earth. Not once had they lost contact. Now that they were almost returned . . .

The director suggested hopefully, "Perhaps they had a power breakdown."

"I don't think so." Matt shook his head. "But anyway we're only seven months out. We should be able to contact other radio stations. I don't understand it at all."

Their return to the messroom was greeted by an excited volley of questions from the others. The director held up his hands in dismay.

"The trouble is on Earth," he explained when quiet was restored. "Our instruments are functioning quite all right. There probably has been a power stoppage of some sort. We should re-establish contact any minute."

But by the beginning of the rest period seven hours later, Earth was still silent.

No one slept that night. Matt Magof-

fin tried, but at length he gave up and switched on the lights in his cabin. He drew on comfortable gray coveralls, which made him look even stockier than he was, and departed for the messroom.

Counting the crew, there were thirty-one members of the expedition—nine women and twenty-two men. Everyone of them, Matt realized, must be present. The tension was so apparent that he could feel a thrill of nervousness.

"No word, I suppose?" he asked, dropping into a vacant seat beside Lynn.

"No," the girl shook her head, setting her shoulder-length, yellow hair to swinging. There was generally a half-wicked, half-mischievous twinkle in her blue eyes, but it was lacking tonight. Little frown lines creased her low broad forehead. "You don't suppose the plague has anything to do with it, do you Matt?"

"Plague? How could the plague affect broadcasting?"

"I don't know." She shrugged helplessly. "Let's go up to the observation deck. This waiting is driving me off my beam."

"Sure."

Matt followed her into the passage. She was wearing coveralls like his own, but of a trimmer cut. She was unquestionably the prettiest of the nine women, he reflected. And hard as nails.

Two years on the treacherous Martian deserts had enabled Matt to arrive at a pretty accurate estimate of everyone by the way they reacted to danger, to the disappointment at failing to discover evidence of life, to their cramped quarters.

Their disappointment had been greater because Mars had been the last hope of discovering life in the Solar System besides that of Earth.

No fossil life had been reported on the moon. The Reeves' expedition to Venus two years ago had found that the Venusian clouds were composed of dust swirling about a desiccated and lifeless world. Mercury had not yet been reached, nor any of the outer planets, but there was little expectation that life could have lodged in such inhospitable environments.

No, in all the Solar System, Earth apparently was the only planet where septic conditions prevailed—and life could germinate . . .

THEY reached the observation deck in the bullet-shaped nose of the vessel. Here the hull was built up of many small plates of quartzite like the facets of a fly's eye. They had an unobstructed view of the ebony arch of the heavens with Sol flaming like a beacon a point to starboard.

"Where's Earth?" Lynn asked. "I never can find it."

He pointed it out, a bright greenish star on the port side of the ship. It was just assuming a disk-shape with its tiny moon barely visible beside it.

"It looks so far away," said the girl with a shiver. "I'm homesick, I guess. We've been gone almost three years."

Matt said. "It's a long time." He slipped his arm about her waist.

Lynn let her yellow head rest on his shoulder. "I'm tired of being tough. I'm scared. I want somebody to baby me and tell me everything's all right.

"You—you don't think anything's happened to Earth, do you Matt?"

"Nothing could happen to seven billion people that suddenly! We've got the jitters. We've been out too long." He kissed her almost roughly.

The girl clung to him half in terror. Matt could feel her taut young body pressed against him. Slowly the tension melted out of her muscles. *Fool,* he thought, *why didn't I try this two years ago?"*

Matt stiffened. Over the crown of Lynn's yellow hair he caught sight of a pale drawn face in the shadows of the ladder well across the deck.

It took him a second to recognize Nesbit, the palaeontologist, a young man only a few years out of college.

"What is it?" Lynn asked, turning her head. "Oh!"

Nesbit glared at the pair silently; then his face disappeared as he withdrew down the ladder.

"What the hell's eating him?" asked Matt.

Lynn bit her lip. "He must have followed us up. He . . ." She paused, looking embarrassed. "He asked me to marry him when we reach Earth."

"Good Lord," ejaculated Matt. He turned the girl loose. "I wouldn't . . ."

Lynn's arms went around him fiercely

and shook him. "Silly. He's just a kid. I tried to let him down easy, but I certainly didn't promise to marry him."

A grin spread across Matt's face. His arms tightened. From the corner of his eye, he could see the unwinking green disk of Earth, silent, cold, and unbelievably far away.

DURING the next three months, they tore the radio down seven times and rebult it with infinite care. They tested every tube and circuit. They might as well have saved their time.

Not a single message reached them from Earth.

After three months they gave up trying at last and a queer sense of dread took possession of them as the earth slowly expanded.

Sparks was a wreck. He spent incredible stretches in the radio shack listening for a signal—any signal—from his dead instruments. The cook went berserk and stabbed one of the engineers. Dr. Gwathmey, the gentle, gray-haired psychologist, picked a fight with Pendergrast, the expedition's gentle, gray-haired anthropologist over the theory that life had resulted from spores drifting to Earth on light tides. The two old men had battled it out in the messroom with their fists.

They were all, Matt realized, strained, nervous, edgy . . .

On the seventh of May the *Argus* began to drop cautiously down through a blanket of clouds that hid the surface of Earth. Everyone was at the ports, but they were descending on the night side of the planet, and the clouds were like soup.

Nothing was to be seen.

They were long since through the Heaviside layer, but still no broadcast had reached them. The ether was as silent as it must have been before the discovery of radio.

"Hell!" said Matt. "There's nothing to be seen out there." He took his nose away from the port beyond which the wet clouds were roiling in sheets of red, tinted by the flaming jets. "I'm going to wait in the messroom."

He stamped off. He had grown thinner and his face was lined. His blue eyes were haggard. The *Argus* lurched and dropped a dozen feet, hurling him to his knees.

Matt cursed viciously and caught his balance to stagger into the mess room. Isaac Trigg, the director was there, and Pendergrast. They sat tense as violin strings, waiting.

"I couldn't stand it in the control room," Trigg explained to Matt. "They're guiding us down with radar. There's been no radio beam to lead us in. What the hell's wrong? You'd think Earth was a tomb!"

"Where are we?" Matt asked as he flung himself in a chair.

The director shook his head. "Some place in North America, the Ohio valley, I believe. But the clouds shut us off before the navigator could take accurate shots."

The loud speaker blared into sudden life, the first time since the Silence! The men jumped to their feet, thinking that at last contact had been established with Earth. Then they realized that it was the captain speaking over the intercommunicator.

Matt cursed again, then paused.

"Attention!" the loud speaker blared. *"Attention, everyone. We are descending in very hilly country. The radar reveals an irregular surface beneath us. Please secure yourselves in your seats. Be sure to fasten the safety straps."*

"Hilly country!" said Matt and buckled his safety strap. "But where?"

Most of the others straggled into their seats. There was no conversation. Their faces were strained and white.

"Four thousand feet!" came the captain's voice over the broadcaster. *"Visibility zero. Check your safety belts."*

Matt was conscious of a nervous rustle in the messroom. He realized that he was biting his lip.

The *Argus* lurched, fell another hundred feet and brought up with a stuttering roar from her tubes. The business of landing a rocket ship without a beam was nasty and uncertain. Matt could feel his heart pumping almost in his mouth.

He looked about for Lynn and found her three seats off. She gave him a wan grin, but blanched as the *Argus* rolled sickeningly.

"Three thousand feet!" came the voice through the loud speaker. *"Clouds and rain."*

An eternity went by.

At a thousand feet the suspense made Matt ill. The jets were striking the surface now, bouncing back, dispelling the clouds directly beneath them.

"Wooded hills below," said the loud speaker. *"Five hundred feet!"*

Again the minutes crawled away. There was a faint jar, then a settling lurch. It was almost unexpected when it came. The jets fell silent.

Earth!

Matt found himself looking around at the strained faces. Hesitantly, he threw off his straps and stood up. Others followed suit. None of them, Matt realized, was anxious to be the first out.

It was a strange homecoming—certainly nothing like the one they had all planned before the silence!

"Well," said Matt, "someone's got to be first."

He made his way to the main port. Silent, and uneasy, they all trooped after him.

"What the hell!" said Matt with a sudden grin. He spat on his hands and began to unscrew the bolts.

There was a collective sigh from those behind as he kicked open the heavy port.

Only rain and blackness met his eyes.

II

HE INHALED DEEPLY. THE AIR was moist and sweet after the tainted stuff they'd been breathing for three years. He'd forgotten how sweet. It was almost intoxicating.

The ladder was lowered. Matt went over the side, riding it down. When it struck, he leaped off and scooped up a double-handful of the muddy earth.

There was a shout from above. Then everyone, staff and crew, came swarming down the ladder.

For a while they went a little mad, dancing and scooping up the blessed mud.

The director at last called a halt. "Hold on," he yelled above their laughing.

Matt was conscious suddenly of the cold rain. He was drenched to his hide, and he shivered. He glanced around, peering into the night.

As well as he could distinguish, they had come down in a valley. He could hear a stream purling on his left, and saw the dark slope of pines reared up behind the ship.

"It's a little after one in the morning, Earth time," the director called out. "There's nothing that we can do tonight . . ."

"I'd like to climb to the top of the hill and look around," Matt interrupted. "We might spot a light."

"And I!"

"Me, too." The last was Lynn's voice, Matt recognized. A dozen others echoed the wish.

"Very well," said the director. "I—I think that I, too, shall go along."

They struggled up the hill in the black and the rain. It was higher than Matt had guessed, but at length they came to the crest.

Slowly Matt turned around and around.

Blackness!

Everywhere he looked there was only impenetrable blackness. Not even a pin prick of light broke the monotony.

"We—we must be in an unsettled area," Lynn ventured in a small voice at his elbow.

He looked around at the blur that was the girl. "It's the country," he suggested. "People go to bed early in the country."

"Maybe," said the girl. "I . . . let's go back to the ship, Matt. I'm cold."

Without a word, he took her arm and piloted her back down the slope. They climbed the ladder.

"What's wrong here, Matt?" asked the girl, her eyes wide and frightened.

"Wrong?" echoed Matt. They had reached the corridor to the cabins. "Nothing, so far as we know. The fact that there weren't any lights doesn't mean anything. We may be in the mountains."

He paused. "You should skin out of those clothes. You're soaked to the skin."

She shivered again. Her thin coveralls were plastered against her, revealing every swelling curve and indentation. Her hair hung limp and wringing wet. A little bead of water trickled down her tip-tilted nose.

"You look like a drowned rat," he informed her with a grin.

A sudden shrill scream burst on their ears, followed by terrified shouting.

Lynn stiffened. "What's that?"

But Matt was already plunging for the air lock.

He was met, and almost bowled over, by the tide of frightened men and women flooding up the ladder into the ship. He grabbed the nearest one.

"What is it? What's wrong out there?"

"It was a cow!"

"A cow?"

"A wild cow. It charged us—or whatever cows do."

"It was a bull," corrected Howes, the archaeologist. "I—I think it got Pendergrast."

A dead silence met Howe's words. Matt glanced over the heads in the crowded passage. "Pendergrast here?"

There wasn't any answer.

From the ground below came a snort and the sound of crashing brush.

Matt pushed to the port. He could see nothing through the blackness and the rain. "Pendergrast!" he called. "Pendergrast!"

Only the endlessly dripping rain could be heard.

He turned angrily on the others. "Get a light and the express rifle!"

"Matt!" said Lynn. She had squeezed to his side. "You're not going down there?"

"I'm going after Pendergrast."

She said, "Matt, please don't go. Let someone else." She took his hand, kissed it shamelessly and pressed it to her breast. "Wait till morning, Matt."

"He might be alive. You go on to your cabin and get out of those wet clothes."

"I'm not moving a foot until you get back." She still held onto his hand.

AFTER a few minutes the chief engineeer pushed through the press and handed Matt the rifle. "I'll take the light," he said. "We'll both go down."

"Thanks," said Matt. He made sure a cartridge was in the chamber and then began to climb down the ladder.

From over his head, the chief engineer's light flashed, probing the brush below. Matt could see no sign of a bull or of Pendergrast. He reached the soggy earth and waited until the chief joined him.

"It was over that way," said the chief, flashing his light toward a clump of brush beyond the circle that had been charred black by the jets.

They began to advance cautiously. The light picked out a wet shapeless bundle on the ground a yard or two this side of the thicket.

"That's Pendergrast, I guess," said Matt in a tight voice.

"Yes, I suppose so!" The chief sounded sick. "What's that?"

Matt had heard it, too, a crashing in the thicket. He halted and swung up his rifle.

The next instant the head of a large Jersey bull came into view. The animal stalked into the circle of light. The bull lowered his head and snorted, pawing the mud.

Matt fired. He fired for the neck. The bull's knees folded; he slumped gently to the ground.

"Got him, by God!" said the chief. There was a ragged cheer from the ship behind them.

"Well," said Matt in an unhappy voice. "We may as well get it over with. Pendergrast might be alive."

But he wasn't. Pendergrast had been an old man, and the bull had gored him cruelly. Matt doubted that he had lived more than a minute or two. They hauled his broken body up with a rope and laid it out on his bunk.

From outside there came the eerie hoot of an owl. Somewhere in the distance dogs were barking.

"There must be a farmohuse in the neighborhood after all," the director said, closing the door to Pendergrast's cabin.

But Matt, remembering the bull, said, "I wouldn't count on it, Isaac."

"Eh?" said Isaac.

"Dogs can run wild," Matt reminded him. "They're a hell of a sight less dangerous than bulls."

THE NEXT MORNING, it was decided that a party of five of the younger men should reconnoiter the immediate vicinity, being careful not to go so far that they couldn't make it back to the ship by dark.

"Be careful," the director admonished them. Matt, who was one of the party, noticed that Isaac Trigg's hands shook slightly. He had not shaved, and deep blue circles haunted his eyes. "The country hereabouts seems to be quite wild. We . . ." the director bit his lip—"we may have come down in a plague area that has been segregated!"

The same thought had been uppermost in everyone's mind, but none of them had had the courage to express it.

"Don't," went on the director, "drink or eat anything except what you take along, and be careful about investigating deserted houses. That's all, I suppose—and good luck."

They were turning to leave when Lynn Clark presented herself. "Hold on," she said. "I'm going along."

"Nonsense!" exploded the director. "The women are staying here in the ship!"

Matt said, "Don't be obstinate, Lynn."

But the girl set her mouth. "I'm the official photographer and reporter. It's my job."

She was dressed in breeches and boots and a loose shirt. She had a holstered automatic slung about her hips, and it wasn't a woman's pearl-handled toy, but an ugly black .45 automatic pistol.

Matt said, "We don't know what we might run up against. Frankly, Lynn, we can't afford to be handicapped with looking after you."

She gave him a scathing glance. "I can take care of myself. I don't need you or anyone else to look after me!"

She walked to the open air lock, drew the automatic and fired six shots at a sapling some twenty-five yards distant.

Bark flew. The sapling quivered. All six shots, Matt realized, could have been covered by a four-inch circle.

She turned around and eyed the palaeobotanist coolly. "As for taking care of myself, Mister Magoffin, I may not be as big as a horse, but I can handle you. If you've any doubts, I'm perfectly willing to bat your ears down to prove it." And she eyed him wickedly.

Someone tittered.

Matt could feel himself getting red. His neck swelled. Then his sense of humor came to his rescue, and he roared, slapping his thighs. He couldn't have done anything that would have disconcerted Lynn more.

She flushed darkly and slung the camera about her neck. "Nevertheless, I'm going along."

Matt shrugged. "Fine, we can use you as a guard."

The director said helplessly, "Very well, Miss Clark, but don't stray from the party."

Then he shook hands all around and bade them be careful once more. It gave Matt an odd feeling. They were acting as if they were preparing to explore a strange alien planet instead of Earth.

IT WAS a queer homecoming in more ways than one, he reflected soberly.

The little party of five men and a girl made their way cautiously down the valley. They were all armed with high powered rifles except the girl, and she had her automatic. They didn't talk much.

The rain had stopped and a warm spring sun beat down relentlessly. Matt began to sweat. He was conscious of birds among the scrub pine and oak cloaking the hillsides. They were familiar birds—robins and sparrows.

There was a drowsy hum of bees in the air. A crow flapped overhead, cawing discordantly. The brook, muddy and swollen by the rains, purled along on their left.

"Watch the wire," said Bascom. The *Argus*' captain was in the lead. He pointed out a rusted strand of barb wire half hidden by weeds. Ahead of them was an opening in the woods.

It might have been a pasture at one time, but it was overgrown with ironweed and sassafras shoots.

Matt said, "Isn't that a house? There." He pointed. "Straight down the valley. See? In among that clump of trees."

"Yes," Lynn said breathlessly. "We couldn't have seen any lights last night because of the foliage."

"Don't get too hopeful," said Matt.

They trooped eagerly across the pasture and climbed another rusted fence. When they were still fifty yards distant, it became apparent that the house was deserted.

It was a big frame farm house, Matt saw. The front door hung askew. Several panes of glass were gone from the windows, and the yard was overgrown with weeds.

Lynn's mouth drooped with disappointment. Then she squared her shoulders. "Maybe it's just vacant," she suggested hopefully.

Captain Bascom frowned.

Matt said, "There's no use kidding ourselves. Something's happened. We'd better be prepared for some kind of a shock. Maybe, like Isaac suggested, we've landed

in a plague area that's been evacuated."

"Well," said Captain Bascom, "we'd better take a look at the house."

They started across the side yard again, when a squeal from within the building halted them. There was the clatter of sharp hoofs. A poland china boar burst out of the front door and across the porch. He was big, almost as big as a pony, and lean as a Georgia razor-back. Two wicked tusks curved upward a good seven inches from his snout. His little bloodshot eyes surveyed the intruders angrily. Then without a sound he charged.

MATT drew a bead directly between and a little above the boar's eyes and squeezed the trigger. The 30-06 kicked viciously. The boar plunged snout-on into the soft earth, squealing eerily. Blood gushed from its mouth. Its feet threshed spasmodically, and then fell still.

Matt could feel his pulse beating high and hot in his throat. He worked another cartridge into the chamber with his bolt. "Nasty-tempered brute!" he said dryly.

Nesbit mopped his forehead with his handkerchief. "That was nice shooting, Matt," he conceded in a queer voice.

Matt glanced at the palaeontologist sharply. Ever since that episode on the observation deck, Nesbit had been avoiding him as much as was possible aboard a spaceship.

Nesbit couldn't forget that he must have appeared rather silly, Matt realized. He shrugged, started for the house with a great deal of caution. The others followed. They went across the porch, peered through the front door.

The room was a mess, Matt saw. Obviously the boar had been lairing in the house. Bones were scattered helter skelter about the floor.

"Those look like human bones," said Captain Bascom.

Matt nodded grimly. "They are. Look. The skulls!" He pointed at a corner.

There were two of them, grinning at them in the morning light that streamed through the glassless windows. The bones had been gnawed, some of them splintered.

"That pig!" said Matt.

Lynn asked, "D'you mean that boar killed them and ate them?"

"I don't know whether he killed them or not. They might have been victims of the plague. But he sure ate them!"

"But pigs . . ."

"They'll eat a man, even domestic pigs will—and that fellow was wild."

Lynn looked as if she was going to be violently ill.

With a grimace of repugnance, Captain Bascom pushed through the front door. Matt followed him inside. His eye lit on a yellowed corner of paper on the mantel. He crossed swiftly to the fireplace.

"Look!" he said to the others, who were trooping inside. "It's a newspaper! Maybe now we'll find out what's been happening!"

With gentle hands, Matt took the brittle paper from the mantel, unfolded it as they crowded around.

SHEPHERDSVILLE GAZETTE
Shepherdsville, Ky.
Founded 1827

"Well," he said. "We're in Kentucky!" He glanced at the headlines.

PLAGUE PARALYZES EARTH

"What's the date?" Lynn asked.

"October 19th. Not quite seven months ago."

"Read it aloud, Matt," said Captain Bascom.

PLAGUE PARALYZES EARTH AS WORKERS WALK OUT OF FACTORIES AND POWER PLANTS. CITIES BEING ABANDONED BY HORDES OF FEAR-CRAZED PEOPLE

WASHINGTON (WP)—By yesterday at seven A.M. the plague had struck down over a hundred million people in the United States alone, it is estimated. Hysteria has gripped the world. Men and women refused to go to work for fear of catching the plague from their co-workers.

[The last flash came into this office at 8:20 A.M. yesterday from the WP. Since then, all wires have been dead . . .

Matt's voice trailed off.

"Go on." Lynn urged in a frightened voice.

As yet, the germ virus has escaped detection. But Dr. Edward Collins, Ph. D., Sc. D., of the Palomar Observatory, who discovered Nova Centauri a week before the plague struck in the Chilean village of Puquois, has advanced the theory that the disease is caused by life spores too small to be detected in the electronic microscope.

Dr. Collins calls attention to the theory that

life reached Earth as minute spores borne along on light waves. He also pointed out the coincidence of Nova Centauri. Although the star burst over two hundred years ago in a great super Galaxy in the region of Centaurus, the light of the explosion has just reached Earth. If malignant life spores were carried on the exploding light rays of Nova Centauri, then it would account, Dr. Collins maintains, for the fact that the plague struck almost simultaneously in every corner of the globe . . .

Again Matt's voice trailed off.

The five men and the girl eyed each other in awed consternation.

III

"MALIGNANT LIFE SPORES!" Captain Bascom's deep set black eyes were troubled, frightened. "Here, give me the paper, Matt. We'd better take it back to the ship with us."

He turned to Sawyer. "You're the biologist, Jesse. What do you think?"

Sawyer was a fat bald man with popping green eyes. He said, "Ed, I don't like to make a snap judgment. We haven't seen much yet. But it's possible, of course.

"The theory is that life spores, propelled by light rays, lodged on Earth a few million years ago. The conditions were favorable, and they multiplied, developed.

"The result of our expedition to Mars favors the theory somewhat. The same spores must have bathed the entire solar system, but conditions were too unfavorable for life on the other planets.

"After all, life is a fermentation, a festering on the surface of a planet. The other planets were highly antiseptic. But Earth couldn't repel the parasitic growth!"

"What a horrible theory!" Lynn burst out.

Matt asked, "If that's the case, then Mars must have been smothered in the life spores this time, too. Why didn't we catch the plague?"

The biologist said, "We were sealed in the *Argus* or our space suits all the time. The spores couldn't get at us."

"But isn't there a chance we might catch the disease now?"

"If there is," said the biologist with a shrug, "we've already been exposed. There's nothing we can do about it."

An uneasy silence possessed them. Matt was conscious of a faint wind rustling the tree leaves outside.

"Suppose we look around," he said at length.

Almost reluctantly, they followed him back through the house. Dirty dishes were piled on the dining room table, more dirty dishes in the kitchen sink. Dirt and dust lay thick on everything.

They climbed the stairs. Matt pulled the first door open. A strong fetid stench met his nostrils. He hastily shut it.

"There's another one in there," he said. "The pigs couldn't get to the body, I suppose."

"Let's get out of here!" Lynn pleaded. "We've seen enough!"

Matt saw that they all appeared pale and sick. He wasn't feeling too robust himself. "O.K. Let's go!"

They stumbled down the steps and out the back door. There was a pump in the yard and, a hundred yards or so from the house, a large weathered barn. They advanced cautiously toward it.

A cow had died in one of the stalls, starved to death. There was also a large truck and a sedan. A cat, wild as any rabbit, shot suddenly across their path and scooted under one of the stalls.

Matt ignored it as he went to the car. "Hey!" he exclaimed. "The fuel gauge registers three-quarters full. We can cover a lot of ground in the car."

"Do you suppose it's in running order?" Captain Bascom asked.

Matt shrugged. "We can see. It's an old-type internal combustion engine." He glanced down at the wheels. "Those are foam rubber tires. They're O.K. The motor shouldn't have rusted, protected like this."

He slid behind the wheel. The key was in the ignition; he switched it on and pressed the starter button. The motor ground and then burst into noisy sputtering life.

"Get in," he said.

They all bundled into the sedan. Matt backed out of the barn, turned around and drove cautiously along the rutted drive.

They passed the house and reached a dirt road in front. "Which way?" asked Matt.

Captain Bascom said, "Left. Away from the hills."

Matt nodded and turned into the dirt road. He had to drive slowly, because in

places there were wash-outs, and the road was grown up with weeds. A narrow game trail ran down the center, but that was the only evidence that the road had been used.

They passed other silent, deserted farm houses.

Once Lynn gave a low cry and pointed to the crest of a rise where a magnificent stallion with his band of mares was outlined against the bright blue May sky.

"Horses," said Matt. "They've run wild."

The dirt road wound on and on, coming at length to a black asphalt highway. A sign across the highway read:

LOUISVILLE
14 MILES

"Louisville?" said Nesbit. "That's a fair-sized city. Million and a half population."

Lynn frowned. "It's in Kentucky, isn't it?"

"Yes. On the Ohio, about a hundred and fifty miles downriver from Cincinnati."

"What time is it?" Matt asked Captain Bascom.

The captain glanced at his watch. "Twenty-three after ten. We've got time."

"Mark this road," Matt warned them. "We want to be able to find our way back."

"I've been making a map in my notebook," Lynn informed him.

"Good girl."

He turned into the highway and speeded up. There were no cars anywhere, except one in the ditch with a grinning skeleton in the front seat.

The houses were closer and after a few miles they passed through a small town. The sign at the edge of town read:

OKALONA
POP. 766
SPEED LIMIT 20 MILES PER HOUR

There was no one in the streets, no one in the houses. They passed a grocery store through whose broken glass show windows they could see shelves and shelves of canned goods. The telephone poles were festooned with wires like tangled broken cobwebs.

Matt suddenly slammed on the brakes. The car squealed to a stop before a hardware store.

"What's wrong?" Lynn cried.

"Nothing. It just occurred to me that an ax might be a handy thing to have along." He jumped out of the car and went through the gaping door.

The store inside was thick with dust and cobwebs. Leaves had eddied across the floor from a broken show window. He found the axes, selected a medium-sized, double-bitted one, scooped up three more and returned to the car.

Just before he climbed back inside, he glanced up and saw the buzzards. There must have been a hundred of them, sweeping in lazy spirals like grotesque black gliders.

"Turkey buzzards!"

Captain Bascom asked, "What did you say?"

"I said, turkey buzzards. They're thick up ahead."

"Oh," Bascomb said. Then he added thoughtfully, "Maybe we'd better roll the windows up."

A half mile further on, a tree had fallen across the road, and the axes proved their worth. As soon as they had chopped the trunk free and dragged it out of the way, they went ahead.

Louisville had almost swallowed the little town of Oklaona. A mile beyond the fallen tree, a large sign loomed up beside the highway.

WELCOME TO LOUISVILLE
THE GATEWAY TO THE SOUTH
POP. 1,567,000

The vultures, Matt noticed, were thicker than ever. They sat on the eaves of the houses peering down into the street or rose flapping into the air ahead of them.

A faint fetid odor tainted the atmosphere, and it grew stronger and stronger as they penetrated deeper into the city. It seeped through the closed windows, strangling them.

Lynn said, "I can't stand much more of this."

"Neither can I," Captain Bascom agreed.

Matt said, "Suppose we turn around and go back. I think we've seen enough for today. If we have to come into the city, we can use the space suits."

"Yes," said Captain Bascom, "Let's get back. By all means. I—I. . . . Please excuse me, gentlemen, I'm making an ass of myself. But I left a wife and two children in Detroit. I . . ." His voice choked up.

Matt saw that tears were trickling down the Captain's gaunt cheeks, and looked away in embarrassment.

BACK at the ship, the director received Captain Bascom's report stoically. They were in Trigg's office aboard the *Argus*—the five men and the girl who had made the dash into Louisville and back.

Matt sank into a chair, watching the director's face narrowly as he read the copy of the Shepherdsville Gazette. Matt felt tired, discouraged, listless. The repeated shocks of their discoveries had been insidious. He was appalled suddenly by the catastrophe which seemed to have engulfed the whole world.

He felt a small hand slip into his. It was Lynn. She summoned a smile. The girl looked washed out and frightened. Her blue eyes were enormous.

After a while Trigg folded the paper, looking intently from face to face.

"I think," he said, "we had better call a meeting. There are some vital problems we must face. I—I have expected something like this ever since we landed last night."

Last night? Matt thought. *Only last night. It seems like a year ago.*

"When do you want to call the meeting?" Captain Bascom asked.

"After the evening meal. We are in a peculiar position. We may be the only human survivors!"

Matt said, "Surely—someplace—*someone* escaped the plague. It's inconceivable that it wiped out the entire species."

"Species have been wiped out before," Trigg reminded him grimly. "But there is a chancee, of course, that isolated communities have survived. That's one thing I want to take up at the meeting. The possibility of contacting any survivors."

Matt realized the director was regarding Lynn grimly.

"Until we do establish contact with other communities," Trigg went on, "we'll have to assume that we are alone . . ."

"What are you driving at?"

"Survival!"

Matt's eyes narrowed, and he ran his hand through his crisp black hair. "Go on," he said.

"Survival of the race. There are nine women. But only seven are young enough to bear children.

Lynn's eyes were enormous. She said, "What do you mean, Isaac?" in a tight voice.

"I mean," rejoined the director, "that you'll be expected to bear children—lots of children—and the sooner you get about it, the better!"

IV

MATT MAGOFFIN KEPT HIS seat after the evening meal, as the conference was scheduled to be held in the messroom right away. He had broken out a pack of cigarettes and was smoking—a long-deferred luxury.

There had been more talking than eating at the tables. Everyone, Matt realized, must have the facts pretty well assimilated. He saw the director rising and turned to face him.

"I think everyone here," Isaac Trigg's voice plunged abruptly into the meeting, "is acquainted with the disaster that has befallen Earth. Are there any questions now?"

No one said anything.

"Very well," said Trigg, tugging at his beard. "As I see it, we have four aims to consider.

"First, trying to establish contact with any survivors. Second, securing our own continued existence. Third, the survival of the race." He paused and frowned, then added, "And lastly preserving our heritage of knowledge." He came to a stop, his eyes on their tense faces. "Does anyone wish to add anything?"

No one did.

"Very well," said Trigg. "Suppose we take up the last item first. We are all specialists in some branch of science. Together we cover the extant field of knowledge rather thoroughly. Louisville is near. It has a large library and there is a fine technical school with laboratories and a library of its own. Those books should be preserved. It might even be advisable for us to move to the campus.

"Expeditions can be sent to other cities to cull the cream of their shelves. We should set ourselves to instruct the children—"

"What children?" Barb Poindexter interrupted. She was the psychiatrist, a plump brown-haired woman with ample curves.

"Your children. You aren't over thirty-three, Miss Poindexter." The director made rapid mental calculations. "You should be able to produce a minimum of seven children."

Miss Poindexter gasped, regarded the grinning men in horror and got very red.

"No occasion to be embarrassed," said Trigg. "Most natural think in the world."

He glared about the audience. No one seemed inclined to dispute his assertion, so he went on.

"This is all very sketchy. Our plans will have to be elastic. We should, I believe, continue to live in the ship until we can thoroughly explore the neighborhood. According to Captain Bascom, there is an abundance of canned food. We won't starve.

"There is, though, the danger of contracting the plague. I am rather hazy on that subject. So I am going to turn you over to Dr. Lewis."

Cam Lewis stood up. She was a tall, raw-boned blonde, handsome, self-assured and groomed to the last degree. She said in a crisp voice: "To the best of our information, the plague struck seven months ago and wiped out civilization. There is a better than even chance that it has run its course.

"If, as Jesse Sawyer thinks"—she smiled at the fat biologist—"the plague was caused by a cloud of life spores from outer space, then the spores might have adjusted to this environment and are no longer malignant . . ."

Matt leaned forward and asked, "Do you mean, Cam, that these life spores may have begun to evolve into something else?"

"Why not?" came the biologist's terse answer.

Matt glanced around. Jesse Sawyer hadn't risen. He was sprawled in his chair, his bald crown gleaming.

"Evolution," he said with a wave of his pudgy hand, "isn't static. The spores could have developed in the human body into microscopic organisms. Parasitic, probably. But when the humans died they had to adapt themselves to a different environment. They might still be with us but have lost the faculty of feeding off animal tissue or whatever they attacked." He shrugged his heavy shoulders. "That's all speculative, of course."

"Anyway," said Cam brightly, "we've all been exposed. There's nothing we can do but wait and see if the black spots develop." And she sat down.

It was an unfortunate remark, Matt thought. Isaac Trigg, he noticed, was looking haggard when he rose. The director said, "Sparks is still broadcasting, trying to reach any radio station that might be in operation . . ."

Matt interrupted, "But it's possible, Isaac, that there are communities without a radio."

"Yes," agreed Trigg. "We're not in a position, though, to send out extended exploration parties. That'll have to wait—"

Suddenly, Barb Poindexter screamed!

She was sitting close to the starboard passage. Matt whirled around, his eyes almost starting from his head.

A gaunt, half-naked man crouched in the doorway!

FOR SECONDS an absolute silence gripped everyone in the room. The man continued to crouch there, a frightened expression in his sunken eyes. He was barefooted and clad only in the ragged remnants of a pair of trousers.

And there was an iron collar about his neck from which a short length of chain dangled!

Matt stared at it in disbelief.

Suddenly, the man seemed to hear something. His expression of fright intensified. He took a half-step into the room, clasping his bony hands before him.

"Please, sirs, please! Don't let them get me. Oh, my God, don't let them take me back!"

"Eh?" said the director.

Matt asked, "Let who get you?"

"The women! Listen! You can hear them. They're trailing me up the ravine like a pack of hounds. Oh, my God, don't let them take me . . ."

"Shut up!" said Matt. "How can we hear anything with you squalling?"

The man stopped talking. In the silence, Matt could hear a faint yelping. It did sound something like an excited pack of hounds. And yet there was a weird bloodcurdling overtone that was half human.

Matt could feel the hair rising on the back of his neck like the hackles of a dog.

"That's them! That's them!" The half-naked man screamed. He dropped to his knees. "Don't let them catch me. Look!" He turned around. Livid scars striped his back. Whip scars.

Matt sprang to his feet. "Get the rifles!" he cried over his shoulder, and ran from the room.

Armed with his rifle and a powerful spotlight, Matt dashed down the passage and brought up panting at the open air lock. It was night, but there was a full moon. The scrub pine and oak reared up on either hand, black and silver.

The ululating cries were closer now, ringing up the valley. He could see lights flashing back and forth in the trees as the pack cast about for the fugitive's trail in the dark.

Matt stood in the round port, the passage behind him jammed with the curious members of the expedition.

All at once, the shouting below fell silent, the lights winked off.

"What is it? Do you see anything?" Trigg called nervously.

"Nothing." Matt realized that he was silhouetted against the light in the passage. "Turn off the lights."

In an instant they blinked out. Matt found that he could see better. He could make out the black circle charred bare by the jets when they had landed, the ringing wall of pines.

"There's something moving in the trees!" he informed the others. He could feel a shudder pass over them. "Where's that man?"

Lynn answered, "Back in the messroom, gibbering. Barb's trying to get sense out of him, but he seems terrified of her."

Matt caught a flash of white from the trees below and stiffened.

Then, dainty as a wolf, a woman stepped into the bare moonlit circle surrounding the *Argus*. She threw back her head to stare up at the towering spaceship. She was dressed in boots and breeches, but they couldn't conceal her sex.

"Hey, you up there!" she called in clear ringing tones. "Who are you?"

"The National Cosmographic Society's Expedition to Mars," Matt replied cautiously.

There was a vague stirring from the black wood, but no other figures appeared.

"You mean you've just returned from Mars?" the woman asked.

"Yes."

"Lower a ladder. I'm coming aboard."

Matt, who had caught the dull gleam of moonlight on metal, said, "Leave your rifle at the edge of the wood."

The woman hesitated; then she leaned something against a tree. Matt gave the signal; the ladder slowly descended and came to rest. He saw the woman take hold of the rungs and begin to climb.

"Give me a hand," she said.

He extended his hand and she grasped it. He was surprised at the strength of her grip as she hoisted herself to the deck and straightened. She gave him a penetrating look from narrowed eyes and then flung her glance over the faces blocking the passage. She was as tall as he was, Matt realized, with hair cropped short about her face.

Matt said, "The lights!" and swung the port shut at the same instant, shooting the bolts.

The woman crouched like an animal. Then the lights came on. Her hair, Matt saw, was red as flame, her eyes green and oblong. She licked her lips.

"Who are you?" Matt asked bluntly. "Why were you prowling around the ship?"

The woman straightened again slowly. "Did you see anything of a man coming this way?"

"Yes. He's in there." Matt nodded toward the messroom. "What did you want with him?"

The woman looked vaguely surprised. "He's mine!" she said. "He ran away!"

GRADUALLY Matt had become aware of a subtle difference that set the woman apart from the others. It was not so much her appearance as the way she carried herself—the set of her head, the level appraising coolness of her green eyes.

Arrogance!

He felt a bristling of hostility. "You've been through the plague?"

The woman nodded, her flame-colored hair glinting golden in the light.

The director thrust himself to the fore. "Won't you come into the messroom? There are hundreds of questions we'd like to ask, Miss . . . Miss . . ."

"My name's Margot," she said. "Margot Drake. Where is this messroom?"

"This way," began the director.

Margot Drake glanced at a wrist watch. "But I must warn you. My girls should have brought up the rocket gun by this time. If I'm not out in half an hour, they'll shell the ship."

Isaac Trigg's jaw dropped. "But, really! That's preposterous!" he sputtered. "Why in heaven's name should they shell us?"

The red-headed woman smiled faintly. "Obviously, you've no idea of the situation today."

"Obviously," Matt agreed. "But we've hope of finding out from you. If you'll just step this way, Miss Drake . . ."

When the strange white man saw the red-headed woman, he cowered terrified in the opposite corner.

"So there you are, Scobbie," Margot Drake said in a cold voice. "I'll flay the hide off of you for this."

Scobbie snarled like a cornered animal. "I'm not going back!"

Margot turned to the director. "You'll return this man to me, of course."

Trigg sputtered, tugging nervously at his wispy beard. It was Matt again who answered. "If he wants to go, he can go. If he wants to stay, he stays."

"But he's mine!" Margot's green eyes flashed.

Matt said, "We don't recognize the right of anyone to own somebody else."

"You've a lot to learn!"

"That's what I'm waiting for. How did you happen to survive the plague?"

Margot Drake's eyes narrowed. She glanced again at her watch before replying. "The plague didn't kill everyone. A few escaped. In the last days, it was already beginning to wear itself out. For some reason the women were less susceptible than the men. Only a few men survived, but possibly a hundred thousand women."

"Do you mean here in Kentucky?"

"I mean in the world!"

Matt swallowed. Still it was more than he had hoped.

The red-headed woman went on, "Quite naturally, women are dominant. And what few men are left are highly prized. For instance, there are three hundred women in my band—but only two men."

"Lord!" said Matt, "what a life they must lead!" Someone snickered. "Where are you camped?"

"Farther down the creek by the farmhouse."

"How do you live?" Matt inquired.

"Off the fat of the land. We're nomadic. Cars and trailers. There's plenty of gasoline and food for the taking. When a car breaks down, we commandeer another. We're trekking north for the summer. Lake Michigan. We'll head back to Mexico in the winter."

She glanced at her watch again. "If I don't leave now, they'll begin to shell the ship. Will someone unlock the port? And take good care of that man for me. I'll be back for him."

Scobbie, crouched in the corner, growled at her words. Matt and Captain Bascom went with the red-head to open the port.

But when they got there, it was already unlocked, standing open. Moonlight flooded the passage.

Matt swore. Captain Bascom said, "Who did this?" But Margot Drake only smiled slyly.

She slipped down the ladder and paused to wave. "I'll be seeing you soon," she called and, without waiting for a reply, turned and strode lithely toward the wood.

Matt looked around for a gun emplacement. But, if there was one, it was hidden among the trees. He closed the outer and inner ports, locking and sealing them.

"We'd better count noses!" he said, frowning, as they returned to the messroom. "It's damn queer, those ports being open."

A hasty check up revealed that three of the younger men were missing—Sparks and two of the pilots.

Matt said grimly, "The fools! I suppose there's nothing to it but to set a guard at the airlock. And it'll have to be a woman!"

V

ISAAC TRIGG, LOOKING BADLY shaken, sank into the chair behind his desk. "Matt we can't stay here!"

Matt Magoffin raised his eyebrows, but didn't say anything. Faith Hutton, the genial middle-aged nurse, comfortable, stout and jolly, sat in another chair at the end of the desk, smoothing her skirt nervously.

The pair of them, Isaac and Faith, had just returned from visiting the women's camp down the valley. Faith had gone, because as she had said with a twinkle in her gray eyes, the Amazons had no interest in women, certainly not gray-haired ones anyway. Isaac explained dryly that his gray hairs should protect him, too—not to mention certain other perfectly natural infirmities that were associated with old age. So the pair had gone off to reconnoiter the Amazons' strength and ferret out their intentions.

They had returned an hour later, frightened and upset, summoning Matt into the director's office.

Isaac said again, "It's impossible to remain here. You may wonder, Matt, why we called you in. But the past three years have given me a rather unique opportunity of judging your especial abilities."

The old man cleared his throat, combing his Van Dyke nervously with his fingers. Matt glanced in surprise from his face to Faith's pinkly healthy complexion and back again.

"What are you driving at, Isaac?"

Isaac Trigg gave him a shrewd glance. "We need someone to see that our plans are carried out—to meet emergencies. An executive, who can carry out our wishes. We think you can handle it, Matt." His eyes twinkled suddenly. "While your botany leaves a great deal to be hoped for, you do have an amazing audacity, an ability to get things done."

"Thanks," said Matt dryly.

"Don't take offense. You're young, only thirty-four. There's plenty of time to master your subject. But at the moment it's youth and courage we need.

"Your courage, Matt, although on the foolhardy side, is unquestioned. And we particularly need someone with your unscrupulous — er — temperament, who can sieze opportunity by the forelock—without any qualms or moral—er—indecision."

Matt burst out laughing. "It's a damn good thing for our egos that we aren't mind readers." Still chuckling, he asked, "Have you consulted the others about this proposal? You know, there's no earthly way we can force them to stay and work, if they don't want to."

Isaac nodded. "They agree with me almost unanimously. We can't make them stay, but if they do, they'll have to obey orders."

Matt scratched his crisp black hair. "Well, I don't know. We can try it, I suppose. As I understand it, I'm not expected to formulate the policy—that's a matter of general consent—but to see that whatever plans are made are carried out. Right?"

"That's it exactly."

Matt said, "O.K. Suppose you begin by telling me what you learned at the women's camp this morning."

Isaac's brow darkened. "They're wasters! Hedonists. They're living absolutely for the moment. No care about the future. In a generation or two, they'll have reverted to barbarianism. There's no hope for them.

"They live in trailers, traveling from place to place as the whim moves them. There's plenty of clothes and food and gasoline everyplace now. They repair nothing and make no provision for the time when decay and rust and disintegration will destroy these things.

"There isn't a scientist among them. And, according to Margot Drake, they're typical of dozens of such bands of women roaming at loose ends across the Americas."

"Any children?"

"Surprisingly enough, there are quite a few. Some of them were pregnant before the plague. Also, they've adopted any children they've found. It's a strange paradox. But they manifest a very strong maternal instinct. The children, of course, are pampered and spoiled unreasonably."

"I wish we could kidnap the children," said Matt, "but I suppose that's out of the question. As I see it, Isaac, we need a site that can be easily fortified. And we need more people.

"With Sparks and the two pilots gone, there are only twenty-seven of us left and

that's counting the crew and Scobbie, the runaway."

Isaac Trigg looked unhappy. "Frankly, Matt, I don't see how we're going to get either. We're under a state of siege. They've got a rocket gun hidden in the trees."

He tugged at his Van Dyke. "Margot Drake asked permission to bring a party of her girls aboard to show them about. I've a hunch there's more to it than curiosity. I think she intends to bring her most attractive cohorts in the hopes of luring more of our men to the camp. Sparks and the pilots are there now living like sultans. We're more likely to lose our men than gain any recruits."

"Hmmm," said Matt.

"As for locating a better site," Isaac went on, "we can't send out expeditions to find one, because the men'll be captured."

"I know the spot to fortify," rejoined Matt. "I was studying the charts this morning. Fort Knox is only about twenty miles from here on the Ohio where Salt River empties into it.

"There should be guns, ammunition, tanks, wire, bulldozers—everything we need. And we can fly the ship there. I know it's tricky navigating in a strong gravitational field, but we'll have to chance it."

A ray of hope gleamed in the director's face. He thumped a bony fist into his palm. "You've hit it, Matt! We'll leave immediately!"

"No," said Matt. "We'll wait until the delegates from the Amazons come aboard to parley."

An expression of consternation passed across Isaac's visage. "But, good Lord, Matt, they're dangerous! There's no telling what treachery they might be planning."

"We need women, don't we? We'll turn the tables on them!"

The director swallowed.

"But they're dangerous," he repeated vehemently. "They're wild, I tell you. They're violent, lawless wenches. Why, I'd sooner be . . ." he shut his mouth, glancing at Faith in embarrassment.

The middle-aged nurse's eyes were twinkling.

Matt said imperturbably, "In that case, we'll tame 'em!"

MARGOT DRAKE appeared at the edge of the charred circle surrounding the *Argus* promptly at 11:30. Matt was waiting for her at the air-lock.

"Hello," she called. "Lower the ladder, please."

The woman's red hair shone like molten gold in the sun, and Matt realized that she had taken considerable pains to rig herself out in as fetching a manner as possible.

She was wearing a forest green jacket that hugged her breasts as if it had been lacquered on. Her short green skirt sheathed her hips before flaring out to expose a goodly length of well-turned legs. The only incongruous note was a high powered rifle that she carried in a competent fashion.

"How many are with you?" Matt called, making no move to lower the ladder.

Margot hesitated. "Eighteen."

"Tell them to show themselves."

The red-headed leader gave a sharp command and a flock of girls appeared laughing from the woods.

Matt whistled silently. Isaac had called her shot. Margot unquestionably had culled the most attractive wenches in her band and dressed them scantily but ravishingly. They flocked about their leader, staring up curiously at the ship.

"We didn't expect so many," called Matt, "but leave your rifles at the edge of the wood before you come aboard. You'll have to be searched. We aren't taking any chances."

Again there was a slight hesitation on Margot Drake's part. Then she leaned her gun against a tree and bade her girls to do likewise. Matt lowered the ladder.

As they swarmed up one at a time, Lynn, who was standing just behind him, ran her hands swiftly over them from neck to toes. They were carrying no concealed weapons.

"You're invited to lunch before we show you about." He glanced at his watch as a gong sounded from down the passage. "It's served now. If you'll just step this way. . . ."

"No tricks," admonished Margot in a suspicious voice. "The rocket gun is still trained on the ship."

"No tricks." He grinned amiably. When they came to the messroom door, he stood aside for them to enter. Cloths had been

laid, tables set. Food steamed on the sideboard.

They trooped inside, giggling and chattering. No sooner had the last girl passed across the threshold than Matt slammed the heavy door and barred it.

A glance down the passage assured him that Lynn had the ladder up and the airlock sealed.

Dimly, he was aware of angry yells from the messroom, the thud of boots against the bulkhead. He grinned. Door and bulkheads were of heavy steel.

He stepped to the ladder well and blew shrilly on a whistle.

The deep rumble of the jets answered at once as Captain Bascom threw in the controls. Sheets of roaring flame bounced from the ground up past the ports.

From the outside, Matt realized, the *Argus* must present an awe inspiring sight cloaked in fire. He felt the deck shudder, then press strongly against the soles of his feet.

They were off.

He grabbed Lynn in a bear hug and whirled her precariously around the shimmying deck.

"We got 'em!" he shouted above the sullen thunder of the tubes. "We've trapped 'em! Nineteen!"

Lynn gasped, "Put me down!" and struck him a hard blow in the solar plexus.

Matt grunted, dropping her with a thump.

"I don't see why you're so elated," she said grimly.

A twinkle began to gleam in Matt's blue eyes.

Lynn saw the twinkle and said, "If you don't keep your hands off those hussies, I'm going straight to your cabin and move all my things out!"

"What?" Matt was jarred out of his complacency.

"I said," she repeated with emphasis, "that if you even look cross eyed at any of those trollops, I'm leaving you flat! I move out! Is that clear?"

"But, good Lord!" Matt burst out, "I didn't even know you'd moved in. Why . . . I mean—what . . ."

Lynn had the grace to look confused. She said indignantly, "You know what Isaac said yesterday as well as I do."

"What *Isaac* said?" He stared at her blankly. Then a light broke. "Oh, you mean about childr . . ."

"Yes," she interrupted. "There are so few women. Not enough to go around, I mean. Obviously, we had to choose." She watched him defiantly, but not without anxiety. "Well, I've chosen. Of course, if you don't want me . . . you do, don't you?"

For answer Matt swept her into his arms. This time she came without resistance. "Oh, Matt," she said, "I was so scared that maybe you wouldn't want me. I—I . . ." She pushed back a little so that she could look into his eyes. "But, if you make any passes at those . . ."

With a chuckle, Matt put his hand over her mouth. "You malign me, Lynn. I hadn't thought of such a thing. I was only thinking about the future of the colony. That was all."

"I doubt it!" she said and kissed him hard on the mouth.

THE TRIP to Fort Knox, only twenty miles off, was a prolonged crisis. Captain Bascom had been forced to angle the ship up at a slant, until they were miles high above the fort, and then descend perpendicularly. Every moment Matt thought the *Argus* was going to lose momentum and plunge back to the ground.

When the jets at length fell silent, he wiped the sweat off his face with his sleeve and looked at the bloodless features of Lynn.

"Never again!" said the girl. "The next time we have to move, I walk!"

They had waited in the passage to the air lock. Now Matt pulled himself together, ran to the port and threw it open.

Fort Knox had been moved since World War II. The atom bomb had made a large army, navy or air force obsolete. The barracks of the old fort had been enlarged and modernized and, at the time of the plague, housed workers who commuted back and forth to Louisville. The gold vault had been turned into a museum and library, the parade ground into a park.

New Fort Knox was a single massive building of gray monolithic concrete. Large as a city block and thirty stories high, the frowning structure was located on a promontory overlooking the Ohio and Salt rivers. It had housed a detach-

ment of the world police, and the laboratories and living quarters of the technicians who had come to replace the standing army in the new era of push-button warfare.

Matt, staring at the cubical gray fort, realized that it had been built to protect the lethal experiments that had been carried out in its labs. There were no windows on the first or second floors. Nothing less than an atom bomb could destroy it.

He cast a cautious glance at the silent deserted town of West Point beyond the highway and the brown slack waters of Salt River, muddied by spring rains. The *Argus* had landed directly behind the fort and the Ohio was at their backs.

Isaac Trig came into the pasage with Captain Bascom. Rapidly the others began to assemble.

"Well?" asked Isaac.

"Look for yourself. We could have scoured the world and not found a better place."

They crowded to the port, staring out at the silent pile of concrete.

"Splendid! Splendid!" Isaac rubbed his dry hands together. Broad grins, laughter and exultant comments broke out among the others.

Isaac gazed fondly at Matt. "You're the boss, Matt. What's to be done?"

"Strip the *Argus* of everything that can be moved and carry it into the fort. There should be guns in there and ammunition. It housed a detachment of the world police force, you remember. They used the obsolete weapons—never resorted to A-bombs unless necessary.

"We've crossed Salt River, but not the Ohio. That means we'd better destroy the monorail and the tube crossing and the railway bridge. We can leave the highway bridge up, but we'll have to fortify it temporarily."

"Then," broke in Captain Bascom, "you think the Amazons will follow?"

Matt nodded. "They could see us come down not too far off." He paused, pushing his hand through his short black hair. "But we were north of Salt River. Now we're south of it. They can't know that. Neither can they know whether we've crossed the Ohio or not. I imagine they'll send scout cars."

"That bridge"—he pointed to the arches spanning the Salt river—"is the only one this side of Shepherdsville.

"It should take a couple of hours for their scout cars to reach us. If we fortify the bridge so that they have to cross at Shepherdsville, their main body'll have to go over a hundred miles out of their way. We can count on from eight to ten hours."

"Not too much time!" Isaac muttered.

"No," Matt agreed, "it isn't." He turned to the palaeontologist. "Fetch the walkie-talkie and the rifles, Nesbit. You and I and Isaac had better look over the fort.

"Captain Bascom, will you see that everyone starts at once to packing? I'll leave this end of the moving up to you."

He touched the button beside the port. The ladder slowly descended.

VI

THERE WAS A VIVID SPRING greenness about the grass and foliage that Matt couldn't recall having seen outside of England. To their left, the muddy Salt emptied into the muddy Ohio behind them. The turf underfoot was soft and springy.

Flanked by Nesbit and Isaac Trig, Matt crossed to the disused drive. Dead leaves and twigs littered it all the way to the gate, where it disappeared through heavy steel doors into the fort. The doors themselves, large enough to admit a freight car, stood open, a drift of dead leaves piled against one massive panel.

"It's bristling with guns!" Isaac Trig pointed at a row of slots that ran across the second story. The grim snouts of fifty-calibre machine guns poked wickedly through the embrasures.

Matt shifted his rifle into a handier position. He had seen the canvas covered barrel of a 5.35 dual-purpose anti-aircraft gun on the roof.

Above the third floor, rows of windows began, narrow slits closed with heavy bulletproof glass. Higher up, he made out banks of rocket guns.

"Seven months," he said half to himself.

"Eh?"

"I was thinking that only seven months have elapsed since these guns were ser-

viced. We should have no trouble getting them into operation."

He paused before the gaping entrance, peering into the dark cavern ahead of them. "Get out your light," he told Nesbit.

The younger man snapped on his flash, the blade of light piercing the gloom. The drive, Matt saw, led into a vaulted hall. Along one side ran freight elevators. A loading platform lined the opposite wall. At the rear, a spiral ramp led up from the basement to the floors above. An abandoned truck was still in one of the elevators.

"If we can get the truck running," suggested Nesbit, "we can move the equipment faster."

Matt nodded. "Do you smell anything?"

"Yes," agreed Isaac.

"It's not bad here, though," said Nesbit. He was still stiff with Matt and addressed his comments pointedly to the director.

Matt said, "No. I imagine the living quarters are on the top floors. Some of the men in space suits will have to clear out the rooms. But that can wait. I'm curious about the source of power for the elevators and lights. Let's try the basement."

They advanced cautiously into the hall, disturbing a bat which circled eerily around and around the light. Nesbit flinched each time it swooped close.

"Nasty beast!"

Matt didn't reply, his eyes searching out the dusty walls for a stairway. "There." He pointed with his rifle.

The door stood open. Stairs descended into blackness.

The fort proved to have not one basement, but three. The first level held trucks, tanks, half-tracks, and cars in solid ranks. The second basement was stored with ammunition, the third held furnaces, a pumping system and a power plant, the generating force being a massive atomic boiler.

Matt whistled softly. "We'll have to get the engineers down here right away."

Isaac said, "Three basements, thirty floors. It'll take us a month to expore the building."

Matt turned to Nesbit. "Go back to the ship, Hi. Tell Captain Bascom to send the chief engineer and the first assistant to put these atomic engines back in operation. The second assistant engineer is to start one of the trucks, load it with explosives and blow up all the bridges across Salt River except the highway bridge.

"Tell Sawyer to take two more men and another truck and fortify the highway bridge. Dismount some of these machine guns if necessary, and set up a pill box at this end. String barbed wire across the bridge. Got it?"

"Yes," said Nesbit. He turned to leave. "What should I do then?"

"Get another truck and start hauling our equipment into the fort. Isaac and I are going to look over the upper floors."

Nesbit nodded and strode toward the stairs. "Come along, Isaac," said Matt. "We've seen enough here."

DURING the next hour, Matt got a fair idea of the plan of the lower floors of the fort.

They had entered through the freight entrance in the rear, the main doors fronting the highway, on the other side of which lay the small town of West Point.

The lower levels were largely devoted to storage and offices. The fort, he realized, had been equipped to withstand a siege. There were tons of food and equipment. Above, they found forges, foundries, machine shops, laboratories and even hydroponic gardens.

It was a world to itself; a world without any inhabitants.

They were on the seventeenth floor, examining the modern, well-equipped guardhouse, when lights began to blink on.

Matt said, "That was quick work." He found an inter communication televisor, hunted for the engine-room number and buzzed it experimentally.

After a moment, the screen glowed and the square rough features of the chief engineer flashed in its depths.

"Any trouble?" Matt asked.

"Nary a bit. The engine had been shut down. That was all."

"What about the elevators?"

"Power's been cut in on all lines."

"Good," said Matt. He snapped the televisor off, just as a dull boom sounded in the distance.

"There goes one of the bridges," Isaac said nervously.

Matt cut in the walkie-talkie strapped to

his back. "Captain Bascom. Captain Bascom."

"Check," came Bascom's voice through earphones.

"How is the moving coming along?"

"Fine. We have three trucks shuttling between the ship and the freight hall. Everyone's turned to." Matt glanced at his watch; they'd been at the fort two hours.

"Arm the women with rifles," he told the captain. "Put Lynn in charge. Have them bring our captives to the seventeenth floor. There's a brig here where we can lock them in. Is Lynn handy?"

"She's right here."

"Let me speak to her."

"Right."

There was a silence; then Lynn's voice came clear and small. "That you, Matt?"

"Yes," he said. "Now listen carefully. I'm putting you in charge of the women. You're to bring those Amazons we captured to the seventeenth floor of the fort. If any of them show fight, shoot them!"

He heard her gasp. "But, Matt . . ."

"Shoot them!" he interrupted fiercely. "We can't afford to take chances—and there's plenty more where they came from!"

There was a pause, then Lynn said, "Yes," in a strained voice.

Matt clicked off the walkie-talkie. He realized Isaac was regarding him with a queer expression.

Matt said, "Damn it, Isaac, we *can't* afford to take chances. There are nineteen of those Amazons locked in the mess-room. They'd like nothing better than to get the upper hand. They're mean, Isaac. Mean as cats that have run wild!"

"You're right, of course," Isaac agreed. "But to order them shot down if they . . ."

A second dull boom interrupted him as another bridge across Salt River was blown by Barren, the third assistant engineer.

A buzzer on Matt's walkie-talkie began to whir softly. He clicked it on. The voice of Sawyer, the fat biologist whom he had sent to fortify the highway bridge, sounded in his ear.

"Sawyer reporting. Two cars coming from the direction of Louisville."

"Scouts?" Matt asked.

"I think so."

"Are you dug in yet?"

"We have one machine gun set up and barbed wire strung across the bridge. We can hold them."

"Let them get on the bridge," said Matt. "Then shoot up the cars. See if you can't put them out of commission."

"Very well. They're coming onto the bridge now—slow." There was a silence. Then Matt heard Sawyer say, "Hold your fire." Again there was a silence that stretched on and on. Matt could feel his nerves tighten like violin strings. After an interminable period, Sawyer said, "Now!" Obviously, he was turned away from the mouthpiece because his voice was faint.

Matt's fists clenched as the distant rattle of a machine gun reached his ears. There was a second burst, and a third.

"We knocked out one car," Sawyer's voice sounded suddenly in Matt's ear. "The other got away."

"Too bad," said Matt. "But that still gives us about six hours before they can bring up the main body."

There was a loud boom from the direction of the river. "What was that?" Matt snapped.

"Barren. He just blew the railroad bridge. That's the last one except the one we're guarding."

"O.K.," said Matt. "Hang on."

"Don't leave me stuck out here in case they cross at Shepherdsville and come up behind us. I don't want to be cut off."

"Don't worry," said Matt. "I'm sending a scout car up the highway toward Elizabethtown. They'll warn us in plenty of time if they come that way."

He snapped the radio off and turned to Isaac. "Well, we may as well wait here until Lynn fetches our captives," and lit a cigarette.

BY DARK they had all the vital stores and their personal goods transferred from the *Argus* to the fort. The nineteen women from Margot Drake's band were locked in the jail. The second assistant engineer had dismantled key parts of the rocket ship so that it couldn't be moved. And what was left of the bodies of the former personnel of the fort were being removed from the top floors by a special detail of space-suited men and dumped into the river.

Matt himself had seen to it that their defenses were in order. Floodlights illuminated the grounds. The machine guns were oiled and ammunition belts stacked handily.

At seven o'clock, he called in Jesse Sawyer. "Take up the machine gun," he ordered, "and let the bridge go. It isn't practical to hold it any longer. I'm calling in the scout car from Elizabethtown."

"Good," came Sawyer's relieved voice. Matt detected a note of excitement in it. "Good. I've something important that I want you to see, Matt. Is the microscope set up?"

"Not ours," said Matt, "but the fort has some of the finest-equipped laboratories I've ever seen. You can use the one here. What have you found?"

"I'll be there in a jiffy. Show you then. But it's big, Matt. It's big. I'll want you and Isaac in the laboratory. Yes, and Frazer, too." The radio clicked off.

A frown furrowed Matt's brow. What the hell had Sawyer stumbled across? He had never heard the biologist so urgent before. And Sawyer wasn't an excitable person.

He wondered why he wanted Frazer, Isaac and himself all in the laboratory?

Suddenly it struck him. Frazer was the biochemist. Isaac, besides being the director, was the expedition's zoologist, and he himself was the botanist!

It was not long before three men were in the organic laboratory. Jesse Sawyer entered, wheezing and dabbing at his moon face with a handkerchief. Matt noticed that he was carrying a specimen jar in his other hand.

"What have you found, Jesse?" Matt began, but the fat man waved him to silence.

"Not so fast. I want a look at this under the microscope first. Then I want all of you to see it, before I say anything. Where is the microscope? Oh, here."

With trembling hands he began to prepare a slide. Matt watched him fascinated, noting the deftness of the biologist's pudgy fingers. At length, perspiring freely, Sawyer put his eye to the microscope, making several adjustments. He drew in his breath sharply.

The jar that he had been carrying, Matt saw, was filled with some liquid that radiated a pale yellow light. Was it phosphorescing? He ran his hand through his coal black hair, his blue eyes narrowed.

"I thought so!" Sawyer muttered. "I thought so. Come here, Frazer. Take a look."

The biochemist rose, looked through the microscope. "Well, I'll be damned!" he ejaculated. "Where did you get that specimen?"

"Never mind. Isaac, you and Matt come see what you think."

When it came Matt's turn to put his eye to the aperture, he could distinguish nothing at first. Then he made out dozens of minute amoeba-like organisms squirming in the specimen on the slide.

Their resemblance to amoebae, he saw, was only superficial. Each one of the minute organisms was glowing like a very small incandescent light. He glanced up in bewilderment.

"Well," said Sawyer, "What do you make of them? Are they plant or animal?"

"Where did they come from?" Matt asked.

"The river. That's a specimen of river water." The fat man pointed at the bottle. "I tell you, Salt River and the Ohio are alive with these organisms. Have you ever seen anything like them before?"

The three men shook their heads.

"What do you think, Jesse?" Matt asked the biologist.

"What do I think? I think they're the first evolutionary step of the life spores that invaded Earth!"

"The life spores?"

The fat man nodded emphatically, crinkling an extra chin. "An alien life form starting up the evolutionary ladder. I'm positive that they're neither plant nor animal . . ."

"Then what are they?" Matt interrupted.

Jesse Sawyer shrugged fat shoulders. "I don't know. I want Frazer to analyze them if he can."

"An alien life form!" said Matt speculatively. "Two dominant life forms on the same planet. . . ." He broke off as the eerie wail of sirens rent the building.

"The Amazons! They're here!" he cried.

From the northeast corner of the building there came the staccato roar of a machine gun.

"The roof!" Matt cried and dashed for the elevator.

The four men ran out on the landscaped roof. They made hurriedly for a tight knot of men and women at the opposite rail.

Megaphones roared suddenly as Captain Bascom called through them: "Don't approach any closer! We've machine guns trained over the grounds!"

His voice was the voice of a giant through the electric megaphones.

Matt reached the rail and peered down. "Where are they?" he asked.

"There!" Lynn cried, pointing. Thirty stories below, Matt could see the grounds lit by the flood lights as bright as day. At the edge of illumination, he could make out tiny shadowy figures.

Suddenly, someone grasped his shoulder.

"Never mind the women," he heard Sawyer's voice grate in his ear. "Look at the river!"

Matt raised his eyes. Salt River and the mile-wide Ohio were broad glowing ribbons of light.

"The alien amoebas!" he gasped.

VII

FOR MOMENTS, MATT MAGOFFIN stared silently at the luminous rivers. Then he turned to Lynn.

"Where's Captain Bascom?"

"On the second floor—in charge of the machine guns."

"Is there a telecaster up here?"

"Yes. Over there. Here, I'll show you." She led him back to the elevator house to a telecaster set just inside the door.

Matt buzzed the second floor headquarters and told Captain Bascom to fire a second burst over the women's heads.

The rattling burst of the machine guns answered. A hail of lead tore through the branches in the distance, thudding against walls in the town of West Point across the highway.

"They're sending us an emissary under a white flag," came Captain Bascom's voice.

"We won't parley!" said Matt flatly. "Not tonight. Tell them to stay clear and we'll talk to them in the morning."

In a moment, Captain Bascom's voice was relaying Matt's decision through the electronic megaphones. Matt got back to the rail in time to see the figures disappearing beyond the circle of light.

He turned away, getting a chance to survey the roof for the first time. It was not flat, but in the shape of a vast amphitheatre. Apartments were built like penthouses all around the outer edge, ringing a park-like area in the center, where a grove of trees were growing on the edge of a dry-leaf-cluttered swimming pool. There were walks, now leaf-strewn, and the ivory gleam of statuary amid the shrubbery. Broad marble stairways led up to the roofs of the penthouse where he stood.

These, too, were landscaped, except for the four corners where the anti-aircraft guns pointed their snouts skyward like sentinels. A helicopter, like a monstrous deformed gadfly, was squatting on the sward atop the opposite penthouse.

Matt stepped back into the elevator house and called Captain Bascom.

"Post sentinels," he ordered. "Four. One at each corner. And relieve them every two hours."

"Right," said Captain Bascom. "Anything else?"

"No. That's all, except that you'd better get some rest."

"The same goes for you," the captain suggested. "You look fagged out."

Matt nodded and turned away, conscious suddenly of fatigue dragging at his limbs. Hunger gnawed at his belly. He remembered that he hadn't eaten since breakfast.

He felt someone tug at his sleeve. It was Lynn beside him in the moonlight.

"Come along, Iron Man," she said. "You may not know it, but you've been going on nervous energy."

But Matt did know it. He allowed her to lead him down one of the stairs descending to the park.

"What about the bodies?" he asked.

The girl shivered. "They've been moved out of all the penthouses, and some of the apartments put in shape. I've picked us out one."

"Us?" said Matt and grinned wearily. "Oh. What about the floor below?"

"They haven't got to those yet, nor the other two floors."

They reached the park. The grass was shaggy, the shrubs beginning to send out untrimmed shoots. Dead leaves cluttered everything.

"We'll have to groom these grounds," he said. "Can't live like savages."

"Relax!" she said, urging him into one of the lavish apartments. "This is home. How do you like it?"

Matt's tired eyes took in the sea green carpet, the glowing walls, the inviting chairs and sofas—especially the sofas. With a sigh, he stretched himself full length on a rose brocaded lounge and closed his eyes.

Lynn regarded him fondly and leaned over to kiss his eyelids. "Now wait just a minute," she said. "I've made coffee and sandwiches. I'll be right back."

It was fifteen minutes before she reappeared. She was carrying a tray on which a silver coffee pot steamed, flanked by a plate of sandwiches. She had combed out her yellow hair and slipped into a wicked black negligee that did things to the slender almost girlish figure beneath it.

A gentle snore greeted her at the threshold.

Lynn stopped, regarding the sleeping Matt with a grim expression. Then very deliberately she set the tray down, siezed his heels and dragged him off the couch. He hit the floor with a thump and struggled, still half-asleep, to his feet.

"If you're going to sleep, Romeo, you might as well use the bed."

"Bed?" said Matt groggily. "Where?"

"In there." She pointed toward a low doorway at the left.

And Matt went.

MATT awoke the next morning alone, but a vague smell of perfume lingered, and the pillow next his was crushed. The sound of whistling came through the doorway.

He sprang out of bed, to discover that he was clad in a pair of his pajamas, of a pale robin's-egg blue—and raised his eyebrows.

He lit a cigarette and prowled about the luxurious chamber, opening doors and drawers. His clothes were hanging in one closest, but the other was full of fluffy feminine apparel. The same condition prevailed in the chests; one holding his own shirts, ties, socks; the other crammed with lacy underthings.

He ran his hands through his rumpled hair, blue eyes gleaming with interest. At plength he went into the bath and showered and shaved. There was only one thing that troubled him.

The water that poured from the shower glowed like a spray of light with the minute phosphorescent organisms!

The alien amoebas had even invaded the subterranean pools.

"My sleeping beauty!" Lynn greeted him when he entered the breakfast room.

Matt eyed her appreciatively. Her cheeks were flushed, and she was wearing a crisp blue smock. The mouth-watering smell of frying ham and eggs invaded his nostrils.

"Breakfast ready?"

"Yes, my somnolent lord. There also have been six calls for you." She ticked them off on her fingers. "Isaac Trigg; then Captain Bascom. Then Isaac Trigg again. After that Sawyer called; then Isaac Trigg. Finally, Isaac Trigg called to say he was on the way up."

He said, "Let's eat."

"Aren't you curious?"

"Yes. But I'm also hungry. Can't you tell me while we eat?"

She sat down. "Sawyer called to let you know that Frazer has analyzed the amoebas."

Matt looked at her sharply. "Well, what did he find?"

"They aren't carbon life at all. They're silicon life!"

Matt stared at her in disbelief. Theoretically, of course, it was quite possible. Silicon had the ability to form complex molecules very closely akin to carbon compounds. Somehow, though, he had never seriously considered life manifesting itself in anything but carbon-based protoplasm.

The girl went on before he could ask any questions. "Sawyer also said that although they had examined sample after sample of the water, they were unable to find a trace of the normal microscopic organisms usually present.

"Apparently the silicon life has completely destroyed all the carbon base forms!"

Matt put down his fork with a clatter. "That sounds serious!"

The girl frowned. "It struck me as ominous, but I couldn't see exactly how."

Matt said, "Minute aquatic life feeds on the microscopic forms. Small fish, minnows, and other fry, feed on the smaller aquatic creatures. The minnows in turn supply food for larger species. It's a chain. Destroy the first link and you destroy the whole chain. In weeks our waters will be devoid of carbon-based life in any form!"

Lynn said, "Oh!" in a frightened voice.

A buzzer interrupted them.

"That must be Isaac," said the girl and pressed a button releasing the front door.

Isaac Trigg, the director, came in, looking haggard and unshaven. Matt thought Isaac was beginning to appear perpetually haggard.

The director took a seat and combed his beard nervously with his fingers.

"What's on your mind, Isaac?" Matt asked.

"Those women!"

Matt frowned. "How so?"

"Frankly, Matt, they're raising hell. They demand that they be released."

"Let them demand."

"Well, what are you going to do with them?"

Matt said, "That must be decided later." He cast a sidelong glance at Lynn. "At the moment, it's more important that we get organized."

"Yes," agreed the director, "but some of the men are—er—anxious that the prisoners' fate be settled. In fact one or two were inclined to take it into their own hands. Nesbit's in back of it."

Matt's jaw set. He smashed his fist on the table so that the cups danced. "Oh, no! We're not going to have those women running loose inside the fort. They'd be worse than a Trojan horse any day.

"We've got work to do. And until we get settled, those women stay behind bars."

Isaac swallowed. "I'm in complete accord. After all, I'm beyond the age when women mean anything to me, but Nesbit—"

"Then that's settled!" said Matt emphatically and went on with his breakfast.

All at once a low buzzing began to sound. "Door?" Matt asked.

Lynn shook her head. "Televisor." She threw a switch in the wall behind her and a small inset screen glowed into life. Captain Bascom's square visage filled the screen.

"So you're finally up," he began without preamble. "You're none too toon. The delegates from the women's camp are on their way with a white flag."

"How many?" Matt asked.

"Four."

"O.K.," said Matt. "Let them in and lock them in the brig. I'll talk to them later."

Captain Bascom looked shocked. "But they're coming with a white flag to parley . . ."

"I don't care if they're coming with angels. The more we capture, the less are still outside opposing us. Throw them in the jail with the others."

VIII

IT TOOK THE SMALL GROUP OF survivors a week to adjust to their new surroundings. During that time they expored the fort and began taking an inventory. The laboratories were the first to be put back into use. The greatest activity centered around the organic lab where the biochemist, the biologist, and Isaac Trigg were immersed in the study of the alien amoebas.

Matt Magoffin had converted the large front room of his and Lynn's apartment into an office. He had been confronted with a thousand problems clamoring all at once to be solved. He had ended by obstinately refusing to tackle more than one at a time.

At the moment he was regarding Lynn rather balefully over his desk. "It's intolerable!" she was saying. "This being under siege by a couple of hundred women. We can't send an expedition out of the fort. We can't leave the place . . ."

"And they can't batter their way in," he interrupted. "It's stalemate."

"But . . ."

"Never mind the buts! There are other things more important to consider."

"What?" Lynn's expression was set in indignant lines. "All the specialists have made lists of the things they consider vital—books, instruments and raw materials. There's a good photographic lab here, but no means of manufacturing film, lenses or cameras. I want the material to

make our own equipment. Everyone else is in the same boat. And what happens? We're under siege by a lot of paranoic women, and we can't stir a foot beyond the gates. Maybe you think other things are more important. But I'd like to know what?"

"Look out the window," he said dryly.

A puzzled expression crept across Lynn's features. She twisted in her chair and gazed out on the park-like roof garden.

The grass had been cut, shrubs trimmed, leaves and debris raked. Water sparkled in the swimming pool. A fountain gurgled.

"But what . . ." She paused, wrinkled her nose. "It doesn't look so green as when we first came! It's beginning to turn brown!"

"And this is May," he informed her. "It should be the greenest month."

"But I don't see . . ."

"I sent down a specimen of the soil to be analyzed yesterday. Sawyer said the alien infestation has spread to the earth. Not the exact same species as the organism in the water—a variation—an adaptation!"

"But I still don't see . . ."

He said grimly. "Do you remember how the amoebas killed all other microscopic life forms in the water? The same thing is happening in the soil.

"Plants depend to a large extent on the work of microbe like organisms that convert minerals into a form that they can assimilate. With those organisms dead, the vegetation is starving to death!"

The girl's eyes widened in horror. "But, Matt, every form of life depends directly or indirectly on vegetation—even us!"

"Even us," he echoed in a grim voice. "But maybe we can make an island out of this fort. Willie Shaw is experimenting with an aluminum oxide glass to seal us in. Silicon wouldn't do. The engineers are drawing plans for an air-conditioning unit that will destroy the alien amoebas. We are going to enclose the roof in a glass dome.

"We can't destroy the alien protozoa all over the world. But we can destroy them inside the fort."

"A hot-house culture!" The girl's shoulders slumped. "So that's to be the future of the human race. If we survive at all!"

"That's about it," he said.

THROUGH the windows, he saw four men bearing down on his office. Hi Nesbitt, the young palaeontologist, was in the lead.

"Here comes trouble," said Matt. He pushed back from his desk and stood up just as the four men entered.

Nesbit's lean jaw was thrust out; he planted himself squarely in front of Matt. Matt found himself aching to take a sock at that inviting jaw but he restrained himself.

"Well," he said, "why aren't you at work?"

Nesbit looked slightly taken aback; then he recovered himself. "Look here, Matt, we've had enough of this shilly-shallying about the women. You don't care, we know; you've got Lynn. But some of us aren't so fortunate . . ."

Matt knocked him sprawling.

There was a shocked silence from the others as Nesbit toppled over a chair and hit the floor with his shoulders.

The palaeontologist scrambled to his feet, his black eyes insane. He started to swing, but Matt hit him in the mouth. Nesbit reeled back, his mouth spilling blood.

"Damn you," said Nesbit. "I'll kill you for this!" He picked up a metal chair.

Matt watched the younger man like a hawk as he closed in. There was murder in Nesbit's eyes, heightened by the blood from his mouth.

Without warning, Matt kicked Nesbit's feet out from under him and then kicked him in the temple. The palaeontologist went out like a candle.

Matt didn't trouble to give Nesbit a second glance, but looked up swiftly at the three men who had accompanied the palaeontologist.

"Any more objections?"

Their faces were sick. Matt realized that the physical violence had shocked them unutterably.

"Get on back to work, then!" he snapped. "And take that crazy trouble-maker with you."

They picked up Nesbit silently and were starting to leave when Matt stopped them.

"I'll have my eye on you," he said, "so walk softly. As for the women, that's to be decided at the general assembly—tonight. Now get the hell out of here!"

At three o'clock, Willie Shaw dropped in at Matt's office, nodded at Lynn who was transcribing notes, and sat down in front of the desk. Willie Shaw was a small dark woman of thirty-five, the expedition's chemist. She was living with Alex Gist, the astro-physicist.

Matt said, "Hello, Willie. How's the work coming?"

"It's done," the woman replied. "That's what I came to see you about."

"Good."

"Not so good as you might think." She tucked a stray black curl into place and sighed. "We've developed a plastic that can be sprayed on in the molten state. When it cools it grows almost as hard as diamond. But . . ."

"Go on," said Matt. "What's the trouble?"

"We don't have the raw materials."

Matt said, "Oh. What's needed?"

"Aluminum, principally. If we could get trucks through to Louisville, we could get all we need. There were several aluminum plants there before the plague."

"Just a minute." He buzzed the organic lab on the telecaster and got Sawyer. "What's the latest development, Jesse?"

Sawyer passed a chubby hand across his eyes. They were red and swollen with fatigue.

"Bad. Bad. We've distinguished nineteen distinct species, all adaptations of the aquatic form. They reproduce in a rather peculiar form of fission. Instead of dividing in half, they break up into twenty or thirty units at maturity, each unit growing and breaking up into twenty or thirty more. They grow rapidly—and adjust rapidly."

Matt whistled softly. "How much time?"

"Time for what?"

"Before they kill off all bacterial forms of life?"

"They already have!"

"What? But, good Lord, Jesse, surely you're wrong! That can't be true. Why—why, it means we're too late! If all bacterial forms of life are extinct, we're done for!"

"Keep your pants on," said Jesse wearily. "We're preserving about a thousand types of bacteria—algae, amoeba, molds—in airtight containers. Enough to give us a start when we get the fort sealed. Plant life isn't going to last very long though—and neither is animal life. We should lay in a supply of seeds, not to mention breeding stocks of those animals we want to preserve. And in a hurry, too."

Slowly Matt clenched his fist.

"O.K., Jesse," he said. "Thanks. Drop everything else and get to work on a toxic agent that'll destroy the alien amoebas inside the fort."

"Right."

The screen went dead.

Matt realized that Lynn was regarding him in dismay. He grinned at her suddenly. "You win. We'll have to smash those women tomorrow." He turned to Willie Shaw. "Get the engineers to help you design any equipment you need. The fort will have to be sealed from top to bottom, windows and all. What about the basements?"

"We can seal them from the inside."

"And the dome over the roof?"

"Build it up of plastic plates welded together. We'll need an airlock, of course, and all the water will have to pass through the boilers. But how are you going to handle the quantity of material that it'll take? And we don't have a tenth enough workmen."

Matt frowned. "We'll have to put one of the factories in Louisville back into operation, I suppose. But as for workmen . . ." He paused, running his hand through his crisp black hair. "Why, we'll all have to drop everything else and go to work on this—and that includes those Amazons we captured!"

"But, Matt, how can you make *them* work?" Lynn's eyes were enormous.

"Did you ever hear of chain gangs?" he asked savagely. "Of slave labor and overseers with blacksnake whips?"

"But, Matt, surely you wouldn't . . ."

"I'd do anything to get this fort sealed in time! Anything! Is that clear?"

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG! Sparks showered from the anvil as Steve Babcock, stripped to the waist and sweating, his bare chest protected by a black apron, hammered the band of iron. Steve, the square-faced, sandy-haired chief engineer, was the only man who had any practical knowledge of blacksmithing.

Matt watched him silently. The chief's shoulders and arm bulged like gnarled tree burls. The hammer came down—*clang!—clang!*

They had set up the forge in the corridor outside the cells where the twenty-three women were lodged. The chief straightened and wiped the sweat out of his eyes. "All right," he said. Fetch the first one out."

Matt nodded at Captain Bascom. There were three other men in the corridor, silent and uneasy. They were all armed.

They stiffened as Captain Bascom inserted a key in the lock on Margot Drake's cell door.

The door swung inward. "Come along now," said Matt gruffly. "No fuss."

"Go to hell!" said Margot Drake.

The lithe red-head regarded him defiantly. She was standing beside her cot, small fists clenched, her red hair like a halo about her imperious features.

Matt's mouth thinned, not enjoying the prospect, but he went into the cell. The girl struck at him. He dodged and grabbed her wrist. In a trice they had her out of the cell.

Margot kicked, screamed and called down imprecations on their heads, but to no avail. They hoisted her onto the table and tied her left leg across the anvil.

The chief spit on his hands, a grin cracking his face. "Regular devil, isn't she?"

When they released her, a heavy iron band encircled her left ankle. Panting and exhausted, she flung herself on the cot in her cell. Captain Bascom shut and locked the door.

"O.K.," said the chief. "Bring on the next one."

Captain Bascom opened the next cell in line.

The tang of ozone, engendered by the blue electric-arc furnace was faint in Matt's nostrils, and the peculiar smell of burning iron. He thought grimly of the morrow when the besieging Amazons would have to be liquidated.

They could convoy the trucks through the Amazon's lines with a couple of the tanks that were stored in the basement. But he dismissed the plan as soon as it presented itself. That way, they would have to divide their strength, using precious manpower to guard the workers when they needed everyone to convert the fortress into a sealed bastion against the alien life form.

The girl on the table yelled sharply. Matt glanced at her. She was a statuesque blonde. The iron, he realized, must have been too hot and burned her ankle.

The chief flicked the sweat out of his eyes.

"Fetch the next one," Matt heard him say.

IX

THERE WAS A LARGE CONFERENCE chamber on the twenty-ninth floor where the directors of the world police had formerly met to discuss minor peace infringements, hear complaints from various governments and transact the multitudinous affairs when seven billion humans had inhabited the planet.

Murals ran around the walls. A large T-shaped table, capable of seating over a hundred, occupied the center of the room. And the acoustics were so fine that a whisper could be heard distinctly from end to end.

Here the small party of explorers met immediately after dinner. They were all there, except the four look-outs. Matt sat at the crossing of the T, looking down the long table, with Captain Bascom on his left and Isaac Trigg on his right.

The twenty-four Amazons, chained ankle to ankle, were ranged against the back wall.

"Understand," said Isaac Trigg, his gray Van Dyke jerking angrily, "we have a democracy in its purest form—not anarchism. Whatever the decision of the majority is, it will hold for all of us!" And he bent his gaze on Nesbit.

The palaeontologist looked sullen, Matt thought. His jaw was still swollen and bruised. He sat about halfway down the table, gazing into space.

"Before we take any steps about our —er—captives," Isaac went on, "there are two things that should be made clear.

"In the present crisis, we need every hand we can get. If we are to save any forms of carbon life at all—especially vegetation—there isn't a moment to spare. This fort has to be converted into an air-tight island for our form of protoplasm, because, in weeks or months at the longest, the alien protozoa will have made a desert of Earth!"

Matt heard a leg-band clank behind him in the silence. He twisted around. Margot Drake was staring open mouthed at the director.

"It's not possible! You're lying!" she burst out in a throaty voice.

Isaac wheeled around.

"Lying? The chances are that all the normal bacterial organisms whether in the water, soil or air have already been destroyed by the alien amoebas! What do you think of that, young woman?"

Margot didn't say anything.

Isaac turned back to the table. "The second factor to be considered is that these women are emotionally unbalanced."

There was a gasp of indrawn breath from his audience. He said, "Barb, will you tell them of your findings?" and sat down.

Barb Poindexter, the psychiatrist, stood up slowly. She smoothed her hands down her plump hips nervously.

"I have been examining the captives." Her voice gained in confidence as she went on. "But, first, how many of you are not familiar with Marties' law of equilibrium?"

At least half of them expressed their

ignorance. "Then I'd better explain it," she replied.

"Amiel Marties, who founded the school of mechanistic psychology, formulated the law that whenever the equilibrium between life and death is upset by war, famine, or pestilence, nature makes an effort to restore the balance." She paused as several blank expressions still met her eyes.

"In other words, when some catastrophe decimates the population, a wave of seeming licentiousness grips everyone. Men and women appear to be hurled into each other's arms by the force of their desires. It's nature's attempt to restore life."

The psychologist's voice was very earnest. She talked, Matt thought, as if she were reading a paper. As a plant biologist, he was familiar with Marties' law of equilibrium.

"The catastrophe that depopulated the Earth is—is . . ." She groped for an adjective, and gave up. "There's been nothing like it before. Although we didn't witness the plague, we've been touched ourselves. We lived together intimately for three years with no liaisons that I'm aware of.

"But, when we return to find humanity destroyed, we become obsessed with the necessity of producing children, restoring the equilibrium.

"These women"—she waved a plump hand toward the Amazons—"lived through the plague. They don't realize it, but they are psychologically twisted by that awful pestilence.

"Witness the fact that they have adopted every child that they could find—and spoiled them and pampered them beyond reason. Witness their squabble for men—and the rapidity with which they have abandoned established morals and their former settled way of life.

"They are the product of a ravening nature trying desperately to restore a status quo after a debacle, the magnitude of which has never been rivaled in history.

"They aren't quite human!"

SHE stood there, looking searchingly up and down the table to see what effect her words had had. After a moment she asked, "Are there any questions?"

Matt, who believed in striking while the iron was hot, asked, "You can substantiate this?"

"Marties Law?" She replied in a puzzled voice. "There are volumes of proof. Marties' own paper. *'The Law of Nature's Equilibrium.'* It has pages and pages of statistics . . . the abnormal laxity of morals during World Wars I and II . . . the effect of the cholera plagues in Naples, in . . ." She broke off. "Oh, I could cite examples the rest of the night."

"So what?" came Nesbit's challenging voice like a sword-cut. Barb turned to him as if facing a heckler, her face suffusing rosily with anger. "If you're unable to see how dangerous these women are, you should be psychoanalyzed yourself!"

Matt said, "Explain, Barb."

"They've reverted to the primitive. A matriarchy is one of the earliest forms of society. They are irresponsible and untrustworthy. If we are to use them at all in the work ahead, they'll have to be handled like a chain gang!"

"Amen!" said Matt with satisfaction.

Nesbit's face went white; he stared at Matt venomously.

Isaac Trigg asked, "Are their cases hopeless?"

"I wouldn't say that. But it will require weeks of treatment before they can be admitted among us without danger. There's a mob psychology about their aberration that is contagious.'" Barb Poindexter sank slowly into her chair.

"That settles that!" said Matt. "Or is there any further objection to keeping them segregated?" and he looked straight at Nesbit.

The palaeontologist looked as if he wanted to say plenty, but he kept his mouth shut.

Margot Drake said suddenly in a ringing voice, "Do you mind if I ask a question?"

Everyone turned to stare at the red-headed leader of the Amazons. She was regarding them coolly.

"No," said Matt. "Go ahead."

"I'll pass up those cracks about our sanity," Margot said. "They may or may not be true. I don't care. But is it a fact that the world is coming to an end?"

It was the fat biologist who answered. "For our type of life—yes. For this alien

silicon-base species of protoplasm—no. A million, two million years hence, the silicon amoebas may even evolve an intelligent species. But, unless we establish a sanctuary here, there won't be any humans to witness it. Does that answer your question?"

"Yes," replied Margot. "Now I've a proposition to make."

"Go ahead," said Matt. There was a speculative gleam in his blue eyes.

"We need you," began Margot. "I'm not denying that. You've got the knowledge monopolized. But you need us, too. We've got the woman-power necessary to do the work that must be done . . ."

"You're suggesting that we combine forces?" said Matt.

Margot nodded.

"There's only one hitch," Matt pointed out. "We can't trust you!"

The red-head looked taken aback. "No," she agreed after a moment of silence. "No, I suppose not—if you've swallowed all that hogwash . . ."

"And," Matt relentlessly pressed his point, "we have the fort. We have tanks and guns and ammunition. We can build the sanctuary despite your Amazons. It may take us longer, but it can be done. And your girls can't save themselves from the gradual destruction of all carbon life. They haven't the special knowledge that's needed."

"Then you won't consider . . ."

"No," interrupted Matt. "I didn't say that."

Margot Drake regarded the stocky black haired paleobotanist in perplexity. "What do you propose?"

"That your forces disarm and give themselves up."

Two bright spots began to burn in Margot Drake's cheek bones. "That's preposterous!"

Matt shrugged. The red-haired woman chewed her lip savagely. At length she asked, "What would happen to us then?"

"Nothing," Matt replied with a grin. "You would have to work, of course. But we're all going to do that—and take orders. Then you would have to be segregated, at least until we get the fort encased, the hydroponic gardens growing. But that's all."

"Segregated?"

"Yes. We could turn over a couple of floors to your girls. Put guards at the stairways and elevators. I ought to warn you that I'd give orders that any of them who are found off their floors should be shot on sight."

For a long tense moment the silence held.

"We haven't much choice," Margot said at length from between her teeth. "How can I contact my girls?"

MATT'S EYES were bright. "We'll release you. You can go talk to them yourself. Of course we'll keep these other women as hostages. You can have three hours. At the end of that time, if you haven't returned, we'll hang one of your girls at the front gate every hour until you do!"

Margot stared at him in disbelief, then gradually realized that he was serious. "When can I go?"

"Now."

"Now?" she said. "Where do I bring them?"

"Into the freight entrance—unarmed! —and in three hours."

"What about these irons?"

"We'll strike them off." He sent the chief engineer after the torch. They waited in tense silence until the chief returned.

"Wait a moment," said Matt. "Hadn't we better put this to a vote?"

"Yes," agreed Isaac. He stood up. "Any objections?" They were too stunned to offer any.

"Very well," said Isaac. "Strike off her shackles, Steve."

Matt leaned down the table. "Get your automatic, Lynn. Take Duff and Jacob Haddin with you and escort her to the gate. Let her out, then come straight back here."

Lynn nodded and slipped from the room. She was back by the time Margot's shackle had dropped to the floor.

"O.K.," said Matt to the red headed leader. "You can go now." He glanced at his watch. "But if you're not back by eleven o'clock we begin to hang your girls, one every hour until you do get back!"

Margot nodded silently. Escorted by Lynn and the two men, she disappeared through the door.

Captain Bascom inquired in a tight voice,

"What in hell are you proposing, Matt?"

"To put the lot of them in irons. You don't suppose I'd trust them to live up to their side of the agreement, do you?

THE vast echoing hall that was the freight depot was ablaze with lights. Matt Magoffin paced nervously back and forth in front of the door, his chunky figure casting a monstrous shadow.

He glanced at his watch and took a last reassuring glance about the hall. The freight elevator's door that lined the right hand wall were all closed. The ramp was blocked; all the other exits were bolted.

The minutes dragged past.

Matt suddenly heard voices. Then a bell began to ring shrilly. He went to the control box and pressed a button. The massive outer doors swept soundlessly open.

The driveway outside was massed with women—lean women and fat women, old and young, big and little. Margot Drake was at their head.

"Have you disposed of your arms?" Matt called.

"Yes." The red-headed leader stared into the silent empty hall, her eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"Then bring 'em in."

Margot hesitated, and then turned around. "Come on," she said.

Silent and curious, they filed inside. Matt spotted Sparks, a sheepish, expression on his face, and the two pilots.

"Hello," Matt called. "I see you boys are returning to the fold." They grinned but didn't say anything.

The children trooped in last, almost a hundred of them. When they were all inside, Matt walked to the door, closed and bolted it. Margot Drake was at his elbow. "What floors do we get?"

"Twenty-ninth and thirtieth."

"How does it happen no one else is here?"

Matt could feel his heart thumping in his throat and his mouth was dry, but he managed to grin.

"If you were planning treachery, I'm the only one you'd get." He started for the side of the hall. "I'll call an elevator."

Matt could feel his palms sweating. He reached the wall and pressed the button. A bell began to ring in the elevator shaft.

Eight of the doors slid open, revealing an ugly machine gun in each car. Matt nimbly skipped into the nearest one.

"Get your women against the far wall, Margot Drake," he yelled, "or we'll chop them into hamburger with the guns!"

X

SUMMER WAS ON THE WANE before the last plastic plate was welded in the dome over the fortress, and the work was done.

Matt, accompanied by Isaac Trigg, made a tour of inspection from the lowest basement with its water-purifiers to the park atop the roof. They inspected the massive airlock, capable of passing a large freight car, and the hydroponic gardens that occupied the entire seventh and eighth floors.

"Not so fast, Matt," Isaac puffed. "I'm not as young as I used to be."

Matt grinned, slowing down. "Is Nesbit back from Louisville yet?"

"Yes. He thinks the city should be converted into a vast warehouse where we could accumulate spoils from the other cities."

"That's not a bad idea," said Matt. "In a few years they won't have to be guarded against anything except the weather. Sawyer was telling me yesterday that he's discovered two hundred and thirty new species of the silicon amoeba."

"They adapt fast," Isaac agreed. "We didn't get the fort sealed any too soon. Let's take the elevator."

On the ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth floors, animals were contentedly munching in stalls or exercising on treads under sun lamps.

"I'm sorry about the dogs," said Matt. "I wish to hell we could have saved some dogs."

"Too wild," said Isaac.

Matt cast a slow glance over the floor before closing the elevator doors. They had trapped cows and pigs, sheep and goats, chickens, ducks, and turkeys, but there had been room for neither horses nor dogs.

They looked in at the shops and laboratory, and the school where the children of the Amazons were being put through their lessons. It was dusk when they reached the park on the roof.

There were birds in the park, half a dozen species, but they had gone to roost in the grove of trees. The grass was green again, and the water in the pool looked like water—not liquid light. A fish jumped, making ripples that spread out and out to the tile edge. A squirrel frisked across the lawn.

"We've done a good job," said Isaac complacently.

Matt frowned. It was raining outside like the night they had landed. The water streamed down the plastic dome blurring the scene beyond. But he didn't need to see; he knew. The sere brown grass, the bare skeleton trunks and limbs of the trees.

Food had grown so scarce that the animals were mad with hunger. It was dangerous to venture outside. But the winter would take care of them. In the spring the Earth would be dead.

Not dead, exactly. There would be the community here, a tiny island of the old life. And there were the new silicon protozoa. In a million years they should evolve thousands of complex organisms. The Earth would be cloaked again with a weird and fantastic life.

Matt said, "The job's not done, Isaac. It's just beginning."

"Eh?"

"Have you seen the plans the engineers are drawing up for the new city?"

"Oh," said Isaac. He chuckled in his chest. The community was deep in plans for an immense city of plastic that was to cover thousands of acres and be hundreds of levels high. A dream city. "The crystal city," he said.

Matt regarded him shrewdly. "Yes. Crystal City. It may take generations to build, but we'll get it done."

There was a man approaching across the park. Matt recognized Nesbit.

"Hello, Matt," the palaeontologist called cheerily. "I brought you something to hang in your living room." He held out a framed picture.

Matt glanced at it in surprise. It was an original Rembrandt etching: the Gold-weighers Field.

"Thanks, Hi. I never thought I'd own a genuine Rembrandt. What have you decided about the palaeontologist exhibts in the museums?"

"They're better off left where they are right now. In time, maybe we can move them to Crystal City."

"Yes," Matt agreed. "Well, if I don't go in I'll be late for dinner." His face lengthened. "I don't want that to happen again."

Both men chuckled. Nesbit called after him, "Next time I go to the museum, I'll bring you one of Renoir's Nudes."

There had been a remarkable change in Nesbit, Matt reflected as he hurried across the grass. But it didn't take a psychologist to get to the bottom of the change.

There was the faintest hesitation in Matt's manner when he reached the door of his apartment. The he squared his shoulders, and pushed inside.

LYNN and Margot Drake were sitting in the front room. They glanced up.

"Darling," they both said in the same breath. "You're late."

Matt winced. He said, "I've been busy."

A third girl stuck her head out of the dining room door. "So there you are. Dinner's growing cold. Hurry up."

From upstairs a woman's voice called, "Is that Matt? It's about time. We'll miss the show if we don't hurry."

Another feminine voice said from upstairs, "It's a new film Hi Nesbit found in Louisville too."

"Come on," said Matt, "let's eat."

He ate silently, while his seven wives chattered lightly. After all, he reflected, he was better off than Nesbit. The palaeontologist had thirteen.

In the next generation, there would be a more even distribution of men and women. Not, he reflected, that it would do him any good!

"Matt," said Lynn, "you won't have time to smoke."

"No," Margot chimed in, "you've barely time to dress."

He lit his cigarette deliberately.

"Matt!" Lynn's voice was frosty.

Matt's jaw set.

"Don't be pig-headed, dear," said the blonde at the foot of the table.

Matt's blue eyes narrowed.

"Get the hell out of here!" he roared suddenly. "All of you! And leave me to finish my smoke in peace!"

Crash Beam

By JOHN BARRET

Dan Kearns, sick and shaking, could already hear them talk: "Yeah, come in on the Kearns beam—it's a new way to die!"

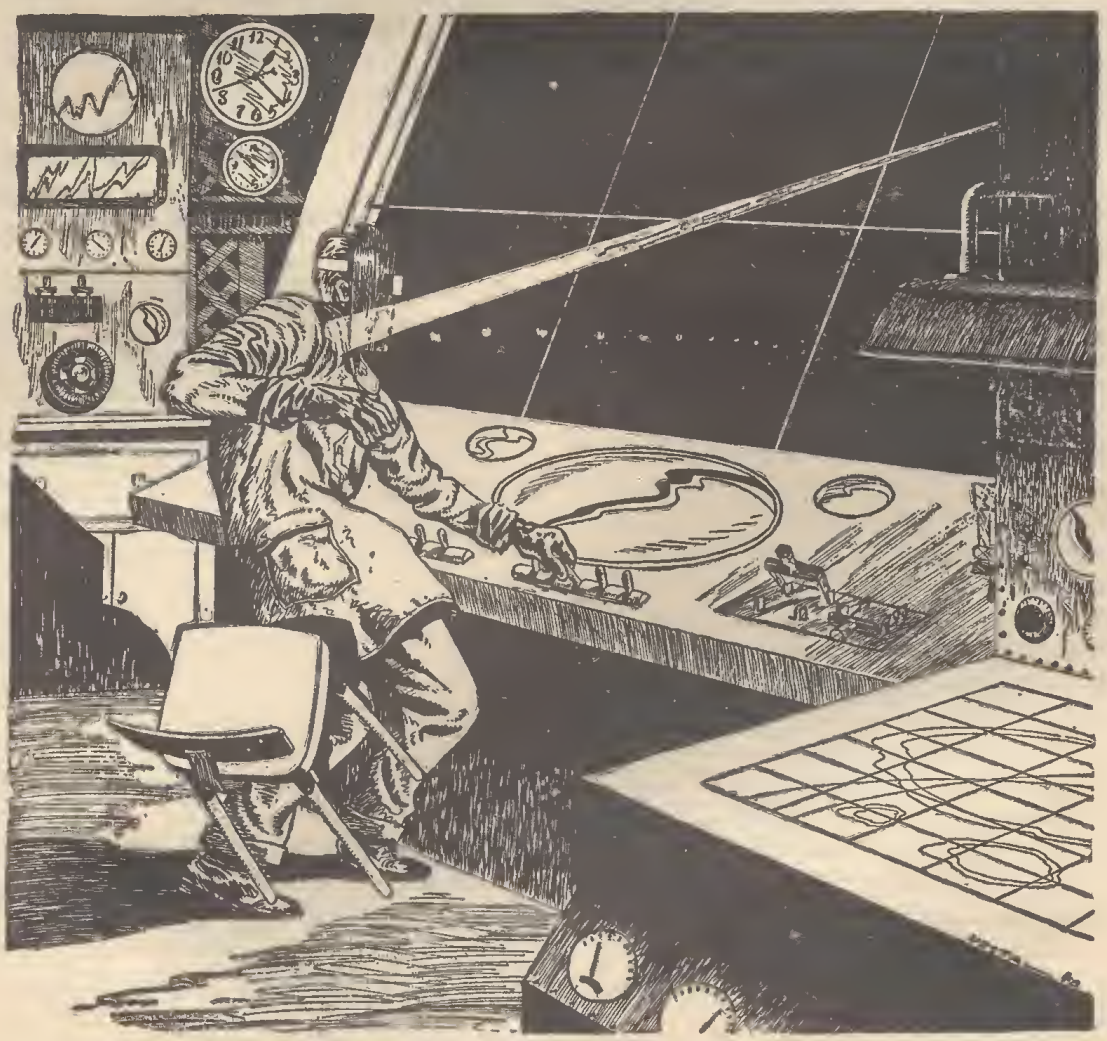
IT happened so fast that for a minute he just stood there absolutely incapable to taking it in. One instant the big Earth-Venus rocket freighter was sizzling through the fog to a perfect landing on the field below. Then suddenly she dipped, undershot the field and vanished in a flash and a thundering explosion that shook the observation tower.

In the dream-like quiet that followed, Dan Kearns heard the faint yells of the landing crew. He saw the big searchlights switch on, cutting wide swaths of light through the boiling fog. Tiny white-coated medics crossed the patches of light, running frantically. Dan sat down in the chair feeling sick and very tired. Then the door of the tower room opened and Rawlins, the supervisor, stepped in.

"All right, Kearns," he said curtly, "you're through. And if anyone asks me about your ability as an electronics engineer, I'll write out the blackest recommendation I can think of."

Dan got up slowly. "How many were killed?"

"Two!" Rawlins glared. "Two of my best pilots!"



Suddenly . . . a beam of purple light!

Dan's shoulders stiffened. "Listen, Rawlins, I'm just as interested as you in breaking Roehm's monopoly on Earth-Venus rockets."

"Get out!"

"I can't get out. Don't forget you have another rocket due in twenty minutes—a passenger rocket."

Rawlins' face went pale. "My God! I'd forgotten." He threw up his hands. "Turn 'em back," he shrieked. "Send 'em back to earth! It's suicide to land on that guide beam."

"I can't send them back to Earth," Dan said quietly. "They haven't enough fuel."

"Then send 'em to one of Roehm's field. It's an admission of complete defeat, but we can't kill 'em."

Dan swallowed. "You're forgetting that Roehm uses invisible light for landing—not ultra short waves. Anyway, do you think Roehm would miss such a chance to crash one of our rockets?"

Rawlins sat down with a groan. "Where in thunder did I ever get the idea we could bring in a ship through that magnetic murk on ultra short waves?"

Dan lifted his head. "There's nothing the matter with my guide beam. It brought in the experimental rocket yesterday and magnetic conditions were even worse."

"I see." The smile on Rawlins' lined face was cynical. "In other words you're trying to pass the buck to Stevens, your control room operator."

The door of the observation room swung open and a wild-eyed mechanic burst in.

"Mr. Rawlins, the control room is still locked. Stevens is sitting in front of the table and he won't answer us."

DAN tore down the stairs and across the catwalk two steps ahead of Rawlins. He hammered on the door. Through the thick glass he could see Stevens hunched over the lighted control table.

"Stevens! Stevens!" He turned to Rawlins. "We'll have to cut the lock. Get a torch—and get a doctor!"

It took a minute with a high torch before they crashed into the room.

"He's been dead several minutes," the doctor said as he took his hand from Steven's forehead.

"I'm sorry, Kearns," Rawlins said. He looked at the doctor. "Well, I guess that explains everything. He must have lost control just as she was coming in. What was it? Heart attack?"

The doctor shook his head. "Some sort of convulsion. Muscles violently contracted. Funny he didn't fall to the floor. Must have affected the whole nervous system. Even the eye pupils are down to pin points." He looked around at Rawlins. "I may be sticking my neck out, sir, but off hand I'd say Stevens was killed."

"Killed?" Rawlins blinked at the form in the chair. "But that's impossible. The door was locked. The room hasn't been disturbed and there aren't any holes in the glass. Nothing could get in here except light."

Dan walked to the big windows. He examined the ledge and the joints. He came back to the control table and tested the switches. Suddenly he leaned over Stevens' huddled body and pulled the log book from under his stiff fingers.

"Look at this!"

Scrawled across the pad in big jerky letters were the words *"Purple light bea . . ."* The pencil had torn through the sheet in a violent final contraction.

Rawlins rubbed his chin. "We don't use any purple beams. It doesn't make sense."

"Maybe it does," Dan said. He turned to the doctor. "Wasn't there some experiments made by a Dr. Aren Linden several years ago on the injurious effect of certain kinds of light on the nervous system?"

The doctor frowned. "Yes, I think there was, but the experiments were never completed."

"That's right. The foundation refused to up his salary, so he went to work for Roehm." Dan swung around to Rawlins. "It was Linden who helped work out the invisible light landing system that Roehm uses on his Venus rocket ports."

"Seems to me you're jumping to some pretty wild conclusions, Kearns," Rawlins said slowly.

Dan looked at him. "Suppose Linden has found the exact wave-length of the most potent ray. It would be simple for anyone to climb the framework of one of the buildings and shine that light in here."

Rawlins straightened up. "I'll search every tower on the field."

"But you haven't time. That passenger

rocket will be here in five minutes."

The supervisor sucked in his breath. "What's your idea?"

"I'll sit at the control table myself. You can do the preliminary locating in the observation tower." He ran to the door. "Where's the welder that cut the lock?"

THE DOCTOR and a medic were carrying out Stevens when he came back a few seconds later. Dan was slipping on the welder's helmet.

"Keep everyone away from the control-room level," he said to Rawlins. "And you better have the crash trucks and the flame quenchers standing by on the field."

Rawlins stared at him. "And what happens to you?"

Dan licked his lips. "I—I don't know. I'm going to try something."

Rawlins smiled. He reached out his hand. "Good luck, Dan," he said. He clapped him on the shoulder.

When they were gone, Dan dropped the helmet over his face. He walked slowly across the room with his hands in front of him like a blind man. Finally he lifted up across the room with his hands in front of the helmet and knocked out the dark glass in the eye slot. Then he slipped it back on. From one of the drawers in a small desk beside the control table he lifted out a small rectangular object and slipped it in his pocket. He seated himself before the control table.

The dials on the edge of the table glowed dimly. In the center of the flat top was a large circular graph with white lines that pulsed like a network of capillaries. He looked across the table through the big window. Everything except one nearby tower was hidden in swirling mists.

The speaker at his side clicked on. He heard Rawlins' voice. "I picked 'em up Dan. They're coming in at minimum speed —seventy point two nine five degrees. I didn't mention the freighter."

Dan flicked a small switch on the table edge. A straight white line of light shot out across the graph, then swung slowly back and forth through an arc of ten degrees like a searching feeler. Suddenly it steadied and an orange bead appeared at its terminus. Dan watched the bead travel down the line, across the pulsing capillaries. He reached out and grasped a small lever sticking out of the table top. As he pressed the lever to one side, the line moved around the graph like a pointer, carrying the orange bead with it. He watched it till the bead reached the center of the graph, and then glanced up through the window. Above the far end of the field he could discern the dim orange glow of a rocket's keel jets.

Suddenly he jerked back his head. A beam of purple light was playing back and forth across the table. It swept over his gloved hands, across his arms and chest, and moved upward toward his face. He jumped up, keeping hold of the lever and studied the angle of the small beam. The reflection on the dark cloth of his jacket was making him dizzy. He reached into his pocket. . . .

From the observation tower Rawlins watched the rocket sweep toward the field with keel jets blazing. As it reached the strip it seemed to falter and dip. Rawlins clenched his hands and swore. Then it steadied and slid in to a perfect landing.

The intercommunication telaudio flashed on. He saw Dan Kearns' haggard face under the uplifted welder's helmet.

"Rawlins. The roof on tower three. Check it right away. I think . . ." Kearns' body abruptly went rigid; he fell across the control room table.

DAN KEARNS came to on the floor of the control room with the doctor working over him.

"How do you feel?" the doctor asked.

"Like I've been sitting in an electric chair."

"You'll be all right," the doctor said. "Compared to Stevens you got a mild dose."

Dan looked around him. He saw Rawlins' boots and glanced upward. "Did you check the tower?"

"Yep, we found him—dead. Just like Stevens. He was one of Roehm's men all right. He had a flashlight. We tried it on one of the doc's white rats." Rawlins shook his head. "Stevens must have gone through hell." Suddenly he stared down at Dan. "But how . . ?"

Dan smiled. He lifted up his gloved hand. In it was a small rectangular signaling mirror.

"I reflected it right back at him."

PLANET STORIES

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ZERO HOUR

By RAY BRADBURY

OH, IT WAS TO BE SO JOLLY! What a game! Such excitement they hadn't known in years. The children catapulted this way and that across the green lawns, shouting at each other, holding hands, flying in circles, climbing trees, laughing . . . Overhead, the rockets flew and beetle-cars whispered by on the streets, but the children played on. Such fun, such tremulous joy, such tumbling and hearty screaming.

Mink ran into the house, all dirt and sweat. For her seven years she was loud and strong and definite. Her mother, Mrs. Morris, hardly saw her as she yanked out drawers and rattled pans and tools into a large sack.

"Heavens, Mink, what's going on?"

"The most exciting game ever!" gasped Mink, pink-faced.

"Stop and get your breath," said the mother.

"No, I'm all right," gasped Mink. "Okay I take these things, Mom?"

"But don't dent them," said Mrs. Morris.

"Thank you, thank you!" cried Mink and boom! she was gone, like a rocket.

Mrs. Morris surveyed the fleeing tot. "What's the name of the game?"

"Invasion!" said Mink. The door slammed.

In every yard on the street children brought out knives and forks and pokers and old stove pipes and can-openers.

It was an interesting fact that this fury and bustle occurred only among the younger children. The older ones, those ten years and more disdained the affair and marched scornfully off on hikes or played a more dignified version of hide-and-seek on their own.

Meanwhile, parents came and went in chromium beetles. Repair men came to repair the vacuum elevators in houses, to fix fluttering television sets or hammer upon stubborn food-delivery tubes. The adult civilization passed and repassed the busy youngsters, jealous of the fierce energy of the wild tots, tolerantly amused at their flourishings, longing to join in themselves.

"This and this and *this*," said Mink, instructing the others with their assorted spoons and wrenches. "Do that, and bring *that* over here. No! *Here*, ninnie! Right. Now, get back while I fix this—" Tongue in teeth, face wrinkled in thought. "Like that. See?"

"Yayyyy!" shouted the kids.

Twelve-year-old Joseph Connors ran up.

"Go away," said Mink straight at him.

"I wanna play," said Joseph.

"Can't!" said Mink.

"Why not?"

"You'd just make fun of us."

"Honest, I wouldn't."

"No. We know *you*. Go away or we'll kick you."

Another twelve-year-old boy whirred by on little motor-skates. "Aye, Joe! Come on! Let them sissies play!"

Joseph showed reluctance and a certain wistfulness. "I *want* to play," he said.

"You're old," said Mink, firmly.

"Not *that* old," said Joe sensibly.

"You'd only laugh and spoil the Invasion."

The boy on the motor-skates made a rude lip noise. "Come on, Joe! Them and their fairies! Nuts!"

Joseph walked off slowly. He kept looking back, all down the block.

Mink was already busy again. She made a kind of apparatus with her gathered equipment. She had appointed another little girl with a pad and pencil to take down notes in painful slow scribbles. Their voices rose and fell in the warm sunlight.

All around them the city hummed. The streets were lined with good green and peaceful trees. Only the wind made a conflict across the city, across the country, across the continent. In a thousand other cities there were trees and children and avenues, business men in their quiet offices taping their voices, or watching televisors. Rockets hovered like darning needles in the blue sky. There was the universal, quiet conceit and easiness of men accustomed to peace, quite certain there would never be trouble again. Arm in arm, men all over earth were a united front. The perfect weapons were held in equal trust by all nations. A situation of incredibly beautiful balance had been brought about. There were no traitors among men, no unhappy ones, no disgrun-

tled ones; therefore the world was based upon a stable ground. Sunlight illumined half the world and the trees drowsed in a tide of warm air.

Mink's mother, from her upstairs window, gazed down.

The children.

She looked upon them and shook her head. Well, they'd eat well, sleep well, and be in school on Monday. Bless their vigorous little bodies. She listened.

Mink talked earnestly to someone near the rose-bush—though there was no one there.

These odd children. And the little girl, what was her name? Anna? Anna took notes on a pad. First, Mink asked the rose-bush a question, then called the answer to Anna.

"Triangle," said Mink.

"What's a tri," said Anna with difficulty, "angle?"

"Never mind," said Mink.

"How you spell it?" asked Anna.

"T-R-I—" spelled Mink, slowly, then snapped, "Oh, spell it yourself!" She went on to other words. "Beam," she said.

"I haven't got tri," said Anna, "angle down yet!"

"Well, hurry, hurry!" cried Mink.

Mink's mother leaned out the upstairs window. "A-N-G-L-E," she spelled down at Anna.

"Oh, thanks, Mrs. Morris," said Anna.

"Certainly," said Mink's mother and withdrew, laughing, to dust the hall with an electro-duster-magnet.

The voices wavered on the shimmery air. "Beam," said Anna. Fading.

"Four-nine-seven-A-and-B-and-X," said Mink, far away, seriously. "And a fork and a string and a—hex-hex-agony . . . hexagon*al!*"

AT LUNCH, Mink gulped milk at one toss and was at the door. Her mother slapped the table.

"You sit right back down," commanded Mrs. Morris. "Hot soup in a minute." She poked a red button on the kitchen butler and ten seconds later something landed with a bump in the rubber receiver. Mrs. Morris opened it, took out a can with a pair of aluminum holders, unsealed it with a flick and poured hot soup into a bowl.

During all this, Mink fidgeted. "Hurry, Mom! This is a matter of life and death! Aw—!"

"I was the same way at your age. Always life and death. I know."

Mink banged away at the soup.

"Slow down," said Mom.

"Can't," said Mink. "Drill's waiting for me."

"Who's Drill? What a peculiar name," said Mom.

"You don't know him," said Mink.

"A new boy in the neighborhood?" asked Mom.

"He's new all right," said Mink. She started on her second bowl.

"Which one is Drill?" asked Mom.

"He's around," said Mink, evasively. "You'll make fun. Everybody pokes fun. Gee, darn."

"Is Drill shy?"

"Yes. No. In a way. Gosh, Mom, I got to run if we want to have the Invasion!"

"Who's invading what?"

"Martians invading Earth—well, not exactly Martians. They're—I don't know. From up." She pointed with her spoon.

"And *inside,*" said Mom, touching Mink's feverish brow.

Mink rebelled. "You're laughing! You'll kill Drill and *every*body."

"I didn't mean to," said Mom. "Drill's a Martian?"

"No. He's—well—maybe from Jupiter or Saturn or Venus. Anyway, he's had a hard time."

"I imagine." Mrs. Morris hid her mouth behind her hand.

"They couldn't figure a way to attack earth."

"We're impregnable," said Mom, in mock-seriousness.

"That's the word Drill used! Impreg—That was the word, Mom."

"My, my. Drill's a brilliant little boy. Two-bit words."

"They couldn't figure a way to attack, Mom. Drill says—he says in order to make a good fight you got to have a new way of surprising people. That way you win. And he says also you got to have help from your enemy."

"A fifth column," said Mom.

"Yeah. That's what Drill said. And they couldn't figure a way to surprise Earth or get help."

"No wonder. We're pretty darn strong," laughed Mom, cleaning up. Mink sat there, staring at the table, seeing what she was talking about.

"Until, one day," whispered Mink, melodramatically, "they thought of children!"

"Well!" said Mrs. Morris brightly.

"And they thought of how grown-ups are so busy they never look under rosebushes or on lawns!"

"Only for snails and fungus."

"And then there's something about dim-dims."

"Dim-dims?"

"Dimens-shuns."

"Dimensions?"

"Four of 'em! And there's something about kids under nine and imagination. It's real funny to hear Drill talk."

Mrs. Morris was tired. "Well, it must be funny. You're keeping Drill waiting now. It's getting late in the day and, if you want to have your Invasion before your supper bath, you'd better jump."

"Do I have to take a bath?" growled Mink.

"You do. Why is it children hate water? No matter what age you live in children hate water behind the ears!"

"Drill says I won't have to take baths," said Mink.

"Oh, he does, does he?"

"He told all the kids that. No more baths. And we can stay up till ten o'clock and go to two televisor shows on Saturday 'stead of one!"

"Well, Mr. Drill better mind his p's and q's. I'll call up his mother and—"

Mink went to the door. "We're having trouble with guys like Pete Britz and Dale Jerrick. They're growing up. They make fun. They're worse than parents. They just won't believe in Drill. They're so snooty, cause they're growing up. You'd think they'd know better. They were little only a coupla years ago. I hate them worst. We'll kill them *first.*"

"Your father and I, last?"

"Drill says you're dangerous. Know why? Cause you don't believe in Martians! They're going to let *us* run the world. Well, not just us, but the kids over in the next block, too. I might be queen." She opened the door. "Mom?"

"Yes?"

"What's—lodge . . . ick?"

"Logic? Why, dear, logic is knowing what things are true and not true."

"He *mentioned* that," said Mink. "And what's im—pres—sion—able?" It took her a minute to say it.

"Why, it means—" Her mother looked at the floor, laughing gently. "It means—to be a child, dear."

"Thanks for lunch!" Mink ran out, then stuck her head back in. "Mom, I'll be sure you won't be hurt, much, really!"

"Well, thanks," said Mom.

Slam went the door.

AT FOUR O'CLOCK the audio-visor buzzed. Mrs. Morris flipped the tab. "Hello, Helen!" she said, in welcome.

"Hello, Mary. How are things in New York?"

"Fine, how are things in Scranton? You look tired."

"So do you. The children. Underfoot," said Helen.

Mrs. Morris sighed, "My Mink, too. The super Invasion."

Helen laughed. "Are your kids playing that game, too?"

"Lord, yes. Tomorrow it'll be geometrical jacks and motorized hopscotch. Were we this bad when we were kids in '48?"

"Worse. Japs and Nazis. Don't know how my parents put up with me. Tomboy."

"Parents learn to shut their ears."

A silence.

"What's wrong, Mary?" asked Helen.

Mrs. Morris' eyes were half-closed; her tongue slid slowly, thoughtfully over her lower lip. "Eh," She jerked. "Oh, nothing. Just thought about *that.* Shutting ears and such. Never mind. Where were we?"

"My boy Tim's got a crush on some guy named—*Drill,* I think it was."

"Must be a new password. Mink likes him, too."

"Didn't know it got as far as New York. Word of mouth, I imagine. Looks like a scrap drive. I talked to Josephine and she said her kids—that's in Boston—are wild on this new game. It's sweeping the country."

At this moment, Mink trotted into the kitchen to gulp a glass of water. Mrs.

Morris turned. "How're things going?"

"Almost finished," said Mink.

"Swell," said Mrs. Morris. "What's *that?*"

"A yo-yo," said Mink. "Watch."

She flung the yo-yo down its string. Reaching the end it—

It vanished.

"See?" said Mink. "Ope!" Dibbling her finger she made the yo-yo reappear and zip up the string.

"Do that again," said her mother.

"Can't. Zero hour's five o'clock! 'Bye."

Mink exited, zipping her yo-yo.

On the audio-visor, Helen laughed. "Tim brought one of those yo-yo's in this morning, but when I got curious he said he wouldn't show it to me, and when I tried to work it, finally, it wouldn't work."

"You're not *impressionable,*" said Mrs. Morris.

"What?"

"Never mind. Something I thought of. Can I help you, Helen?"

"I wanted to get that black-and-white cake recipe—"

THE HOUR drowsed by. The day waned. The sun lowered in the peaceful blue sky. Shadows lengthened on the green lawns. The laughter and excitement continued. One little girl ran away, crying.

Mrs. Morris came out the front door.

"Mink, wa sthat Peggy Ann crying?"

Mink was bent over in the yard, near the rose-bush. "Yeah. She's a scarebaby. We won't let her play, now. She's getting too old to play. I guess she grew up all of a sudden."

"Is that why she cried? Nonsense. Give me a civil answer, young lady, or inside you come!"

Mink whirled in consternation, mixed with irritation. "I can't quit now. It's almost time. I'll be good. I'm sorry."

"Did you hit Peggy Ann?"

"No, honest. You ask her. It was something—well, she's just a scaredy-pants."

The ring of children drew in around Mink where she scowled at her work with spoons and a kind of square shaped arrangement of hammers and pipes. "There and there," murmured Mink.

"What's wrong?" said Mrs. Morris.

"Drill's stuck. Half way. If we could only get him all the way through, it'll be easier. Then all the others could come through after him."

"Can I help?"

"No'm, thanks. I'll fix it."

"All right. I'll call you for your bath in half an hour. I'm tired of watching you."

She went in and sat in the electric-relaxing chair, sipping a little beer from a half-empty glass. The chair massaged her back. Children, children. Children and love and hate, side by side. Sometimes children loved you, hated you, all in half a second. Strange children, did they ever forget or forgive the whippings and the harsh, strict words of command? She wondered. How can you ever forget or forgive those over and above you, those tall and silly dictators?

Time passed. A curious, waiting silence came upon the street, deepening.

Five o'clock. A clock sang softly somewhere in the house, in a quiet, musical voice, "Five o'clock . . . five o'clock. Time's a wasting. Five o'clock," and purred away into silence.

Zero hour.

Mrs. Morris chuckled in her throat. Zero hour.

A beetle-car hummed into the driveway. Mr. Morris. Mrs. Morris smiled. Mr. Morris got out of the beetle, locked it and called hello to Mink at her work. Mink ignored him. He laughed and stood for a moment watching the children in their business. Then he walked up the front steps.

"Hello, darling."

"Hello, Henry."

She strained forward on the edge of the chair, listening. The children were silent. Too silent.

He emptied his pipe, refilled it. "Swell day. Makes you glad to be alive."

Buzz.

"What's that?" asked Henry.

"I don't know." She got up, suddenly, her eyes widening. She was going to say something. She stopped it. Ridiculous. Her nerves jumped. "Those children haven't anything dangerous out there, have they?" she said.

"Nothing but pipes and hammers. Why?"

"Nothing electrical?"

"Heck, no," said Henry. "I looked."

She walked to the kitchen. The buzzing continued. "Just the same you'd better go tell them to quit. It's after five. Tell them—" Her eyes widened and narrowed. "Tell them to put off their Invasion until tomorrow." She laughed, nervously.

The buzzing grew louder.

"What are they up to? I'd better go look, all right."

The explosion!

THE HOUSE shook with dull sound. There were other explosions in other yards on other streets.

Involuntarily, Mrs. Morris screamed. "Up this way!" she cried, senselessly, knowing no sense, no reason. Perhaps she saw something from the corners of her eyes, perhaps she smelled a new odor or heard a new noise. There was no time to argue with Henry to convince him. Let him think her insane. Yes, insane! Shrieking, she ran upstairs. He ran after her to see what she was up to. "In the attic!" she screamed. "That's where it is!" It was only a poor excuse to get him in the attic in time—oh God, in time!

Another explosion outside. The children screamed with delight, as if at a great fireworks display.

"It's not in the attic!" cried Henry. "It's outside!"

"No, no!" Wheezing, gasping, she fumbled at the attic door. "I'll show you. Hurry! I'll show you!"

They tumbled into the attic. She slammed the door, locked it, took the key, threw it into a far, cluttered corner.

She was babbling wild stuff now. It came out of her. All the subconscious suspicion and fear that had gathered secretly all afternoon and fermented like a wine in her. All the little revelations and knowledges and sense that had bothered her all day and which she had logically and carefully and sensibly rejected and censored. Now it exploded in her and shook her to bits.

"There, there," she said, sobbing against the door. "We're safe until tonight. Maybe we can sneak out, maybe we can escape!"

Henry blew up, too, but for another reason. "Are you crazy? Why'd you throw that key away! Damn it, honey!"

"Yes, yes, I'm crazy, if it helps, but stay here with me!"

"I don't know how in hell I *can* get out!"

"Quiet. They'll hear us. Oh, God, they'll find us soon enough—"

Below them, Mink's voice. The husband stopped. There was a great universal humming and sizzling, a screaming and giggling. Downstairs, the audio-televisor buzzed and buzzed insistently, alarmingly, violently. *Is that Helen calling?* thought Mrs. Morris.. *And is she calling about what I* think *she's calling about?*

Footsteps came into the house. Heavy footsteps.

"Who's coming in my house?" demanded Henry, angrily. "Who's tramping around down there?"

Heavy feet. Twenty, thirty, forty, fifty of them. Fifty persons crowding into the house. The humming. The giggling of the children. "This way!" cried Mink, below.

"Who's downstairs?" roared Henry. "Who's there!"

"Hush, oh, nonononono!" said his wife, weakly, holding him. "Please, be quiet. They might go away."

"Mom?" called Mink, "Dad?" A pause. "Where are you?"

Heavy footsteps, heavy, heavy, *very* HEAVY footsteps came up the stairs. Mink leading them.

"Mom?" A hesitation. "Dad?" A waiting, a silence.

Humming. Footsteps toward the attic. Mink's first.

They trembled together in silence in the attic, Mr. and Mrs. Morris. For some reason the electric humming, the queer cold light suddenly visible under the door crack, the strange odor and the alien sound of eagerness in Mink's voice, finally got through to Henry Morris, too. He stood, shivering, in the dark silence, his wife beside him.

"Mom! Dad!"

Footsteps. A little humming sound. The attic lock melted. The door opened. Mink peered inside, tall blue shadows behind her.

"Peek-a-boo," said Mink.

ASTEROID JUSTICE

By V. E. THIESSEN

What was Sam Knox up to now—drifting helplessly in a tiny eggshell across black oceans of space with two weeks' grub? Was this the way the great man-hunter deftly snagged his prey?

SAM KNOX TOUCHED A BUTTON in the control room of the *Wanderer,* and the draperies slid back from her transparent nose. He stood a moment, a sturdy compact figure, gazing into the dark.

"Look at them!" he said bitterly. "They hang there like stars."

Before the *Wanderer* he could see the mining fleet at the edge of the Asteroid Belt, their identification lights twinkling out from the enshrouding ebon mantle of space.

They might as well be stars, for all the progress he had made with them. He had been here a week, spreading his nets for asteroid fragments like the rest of them, and never a sign of his presence had they shown. They hung there, cold and aloof—almost suspicious, he would have thought, had they any reason to be suspicious.

Not that they were unfriendly by nature, these men who spread their nets to trap the errant meteors; but they were a clannish tribe, known to one another from season to season, more snobbish than any social ruling class. They were close-knit, bound together by bonds of danger and hazard, and the dream of sudden wealth.

Perhaps it is only a matter of time, he thought. Perhaps time will make me one of them. He must win their friendship soon, if he were to find Pell.

And that was his job, to find Pell. His was not the hunt for wealth in the heart of some fragment of asteroid. Yet the excitement of the search had long been a part of his life. What Sam Knox hunted he found. Sam Knox hunted men.

He had two bosses. The most lenient of these was the Department of Terran Justice. His other boss lay deep inside himself, demanding much—expecting everything.

Through the left lower quadrant of the transparent nose he saw one of the nets flare into quick acceleration. It was too far away to be his own, and he watched it, each corner of the net a flaming ribbon of rocket fire in the velvet black of space.

A moment later he knew whose net it was, for the mining ship *Fleetblast* slid by him in pursuit, controlling the rocket-powered net from the remote controls in her maw. The *Fleetblast* sped on, unable to equal the instant acceleration that the touch of the meteor sent into the rockets of the net.

But she was soon catching up. With her remote controls she was slowing the rockets of the net, as she increased her own speed. In a few minutes both ship and netted meteor would be hanging motionless alongside, the meteor caught and halted just as a small boy catches a swift ball in his cap.

Sam grimaced. What would it contain when they melted it open with the heat rod? Probably nothing. Possibly mineral ore, to be refined into metal for new heat rod tips, for from this the miner fishers of the Asteroid Belt eked out their precarious existence.

But perhaps — PERHAPS — there was wealth and fortune. Here might be the dream come true. Here by the luck of space, might lie one of the rare jewels of the asteroids, spawned in some once-fiery sun, and flung into space in the heart of a fragment. For this the eternal hope of man yearned, and men spent their lives fishing and mining here. For this they risked the swift and horrible infections of life in the Asteroid Belt.

THE VISAPHONE sprang into life. Sam recognized the voice as that of a woman. . . . *"Fleetblast calling Aeries . . ."*

The *Fleetblast* lay some fifty miles ahead, a speck of light, where the chase of her net had led her. Just to her right,

Sam Knox whirled . . . seized Ned's gun arm . . .

closer, lay the only near ship, the *Aeries*.

"*Aeries speaking—go ahead . . .*"

Before the *Aeries* her net spurted four ribbons of flame. In a surge of power the *Aeries* was off, acceleration full, straining like a hound after a rabbit. There would be no more conversation from the *Aeries*, Sam knew, until the catch was landed.

The woman was unaware of this development, unaware that the *Aeries'* flaming jets were bearing her far away.

"*. . . father is hurt . . . an open wound and we have no more penicillin X . . .*"

No penicillin X! No ship took to ether for the "Belt" without a supply of that important penicillin derivitive.

Sam touched the controls. This was the break, this was the luck of Sam Knox. The jets responded with a trail of flame. He pulled alongside the *Fleetblast* in a few minutes.

He could spare a hundred thousand units of the drug, he figured. He got it from the storeroom. He was quite close to the other ship, so decided against using the ship's lifeboat, a tiny space-dory, and simply donned his space-suit. He then yelled into the visaphone, "Fleetblast — open your port . . . I'm bringing the drug." He saw the lock open on the *Fleetblast* and opened his own, propelling himself into space and across the void. A few guiding blasts of his hand rocket and he was inside the lock of the other ship.

A woman helped him out of the space-suit. "Come quickly," she urged. Sam had time to note that she was young and had red hair as he followed her to the living quarters.

An old man lay there on a bed. His trouser had been cut away from his right leg, revealing a crushed and bleeding condition below the knee. Already the leg was beginning to show the faint greyness that indicated the start of the quick infection.

The miner's name, Sam found as he treated the leg, was Timas Rorke. There was a faint trace of Irish blood in him, responsible perhaps for the red hair of his daughter. He lay back in the bed, complaining at the foolishness that had put him there.

"That damned meteor! I was in too big a hurry to load it, and it slipped and crushed my leg." Timas looked as his daughter. "What do you say, Nancy, shall we call it a season and run back to Terra?"

"There are a few more weeks of good fishing. I can make out."

Sam looked at her, this slip of a girl who was undertaking a man's work. For all her courage she was still a woman, slim and lissome. She was not too tall, rounded sweetly, and well-formed. Under Sam's gaze she lifted her eyes to his, eyes as brown as new-plowed soil.

He had been long away from women, and the sight of her set a wildness coursing in his blood. Strong as she was he could crush her in his arms. He had strength to take care of both of them.

She might have let him too, in other circumstances. Her eyes had already noted the compact sturdiness of his body, noted and approved. But he was Sam Knox, and in his hunt for men a hundred women had tried to deceive him, so that he set his mind against this weakness, and looked away across the room.

FOOL! He was a fool to have not seen it sooner. The photograph of a white-haired man stared from a lucite frame. It was Pell.

The report was true. Here was Pell, inventor of the heat rod, hiding where the metal was mined. If he were here, he must be found, and returned to Terra to finish the sentence he had escaped three years before.

He might not have to finish that prison sentence. Only one thing was certain now. In the investigation of the illegal operations of Terran Metals Corporation, the truth had been concealed by the fact that a way had been found to deceive the mind-probe.

When that shattering fact was discovered, that the basis of justice was not dependable, action was swift. The mind-probe was analyzed, and the defect removed. But the truth of the facts in the Terran Metals Trial was now uncertain. Guilty or not, the Department of Terran Justice wanted Pell.

Sam took a step toward the picture. The girl's voice shocked him from these thoughts. "I don't know how to thank you, Mister—?" She paused expectantly.

"Knox, Sam Knox."

She held out her hand. "We are so glad to know you."

"You are the first one to want to know me. I've been here a week, and everyone seems to think I have a plague."

Timas Rorke spoke from the bed. "You must forgive us. We are a hard people to get acquainted with, especially now."

"Why especially now?"

The visaphone buzzed. It was the *Aeries,* now alongside. Nancy went to operate the lock.

A young man came from the lock with her. He was dark and saturnine. His glance viewed Sam with open suspicion.

Nancy said, "Sam Knox, Ned Hawkins."

Sam held out his hand. The dark young man made no move to accept it.

Nancy said sharply, "Ned! Mr. Knox may have saved father's life. He brought the penicillin X while you were chasing meteors."

Ned Hawkins said with surly ill grace, "Sorry. We're obliged to you, Mr. Knox."

Sam turned to the old man on the bed. "You were about to tell me why everyone is so suspicious."

Timas Rorke sat up in bed. His eyes blazed. "Thieves!" he said gustily. "This season there have been thieves. Old Joe on the *Miner II* lost an asteroid jewel worth ten thousand credits. Somebody beat him, slipped him chloroform, and made off with it. Been several cases like it."

Ned's dark suspicious eyes were on them. Sam crossed and picked up Pell's picture. "Relative of yours?" he asked casually.

Hawkins slammed the flat of his hand against a bulkhead. "That does it! What kind of miner are you that you don't know the Master Miners?" He whirled to the old man and the girl. "Tell him nothing more."

Sam said simply, "This is my first season. How am I to know anything with everyone so suspicious? If you need more medicine let me know." He picked up his space-suit and went into the lock.

Nancy came quickly into the lock after him. She said in a low voice, "Thanks for everything. You must forgive Ned. He is jealous."

Sam held the helmet to his space-suit in his hands. "If I had a claim on you," he said swiftly, "I should be jealous, too. Not man nor devil should take you from me." He put the helmet on and turned to the lock.

Once back in the *Wanderer,* he considered what he had learned. Pell was here, so much had been established, and he had at last a foothold of acquaintance among these people. That should help.

AND indeed it did. It was through Timas Rorke, he suspected, that four old men now stood on the floor of the *Wanderer.*

He hadn't, however, quite planned on falling in love. It was difficult for him to believe that so strong a bond could be forged in the week he had known the Rorkes. The increasing jealousy of Hawkins was testimony to the growing tenderness between Sam and Nancy Rorke.

The elder of the four men stepped a little forward. "Mr. Knox, we are here because a friend of yours has requested that you be admitted to the Miners."

He was right then; the week's cultivation of Timas and his daughter was bringing results. "Tell me about the Miners," he asked.

"We are far from Terra here. Years ago we found the necessity for establishing some sort of society for our own pleasure and protection. We have our own government, our own laws. Each year a number of the older miners are chosen Master Miners. This year there are seven. We formulate all laws, and sit in judgment on those who break them."

Master Miners! Pell was one of these. Sam kept the planes of his face wooden. "What must I do to become one of this society of yours?"

"You must submit to questioning to prove you are worthy. You must swear loyalty to all our other brother miners. You must agree to be guided by our laws, as supreme here, as long as you are in the Asteroid Belt."

"Very well, I agree."

They took a small space-dory to the largest ship in the mining fleet, the governing ship, *White Lark.* Sam wondered if he were being wise. If they had the latest mind-probe, all the truth would come out in the examination. His connection with Terran Justice would be discovered, and

perhaps all chance lost of taking Pell. It was unlikely that they had the new probe, he decided, and if they had the old model he could fool them.

They had no mind probe at all. They simply asked him questions, the seven of them, trained to evaluate character swiftly in their rough life, they watched him as he answered their questions. They sat around him in a semi-circle, and in the center, in charge, was the man he hunted. He had found Pell!

The questioning began. When they touched the dangerous fringes of knowledge with their probing questions he held his face even more wooden than usual, careful too to let no emotion show in the timbre of his voice.

And at last it was over. Pell rose and looked at the cricle of Master Miners. "I am satisfied," he announced. "Are there any objections to the entrance of Mr. Knox as a Miner of our Order?"

There were none. Pell said, "You will take the oath of fealty tomorrow, here. There will be many who want to meet you." He walked with Sam to the lock, to the small space-dory in which they had come.

Sam thought, I can take him now. I can slip a dis-gun into his ribs, and take him now. The reaction of the other miners was unpredictable, but with speed and skill he could make it. And once aboard the *Wanderer* no mining ship could approach his super-drive.

His hand slid down his pocket to the cold plastic butt of his dis-gun.

There was a rattle as another dory struck the ship. A space-suited form slid into the lock. He took his hand off the dis-gun. The figure stripped off its helmet, and a mass of flame-colored hair cascaded down around the shoulders. It was Nancy Rorke.

"Am I too late? I just heard you were up for membership in the Miners."

Pell put his hand on her shoulder. "He's passed the tests. We administer the oath tomorrow."

Sam took his hand from his pocket. There would be danger. He would not make his play with a woman here.

Nancy's brown eyes were on his, filled with warmth and gladness. "I'm so happy. I just couldn't believe it when Ned told me he had put you up for membership."

Ned Hawkins had proposed him for membership! Sam pondered that all the way back to the *Wanderer*.

THE CEREMONY that joined Sam Knox and the Order of Miners was a simple one. There were many of the Miners in the *White Lark*, to witness the oath of fealty, and many more watching on their visaphones. The coldness was gone; he was one of them, and he felt the strong warmth of their friendship. Nancy's eyes smiled at him all through the ceremony.

There was one curious thing. Ned Hawkins was not present at the beginning of the ceremony.

The voice of Pell pronounced. "You are now one of us." Men gathered around Sam, shaking his hand and clapping him on the back.

"Stop the ceremony!" It was a beautifully timed entrance, an actor's entrance. Hawkins stood just inside the room, still in his space-suit, holding the helmet in his hand. He came forward now, his magnetic boots clanking on the steel floor of the *White Lark*.

Pell frowned at him. "If you have objections, you are too late. After all, you were the one who proposed his membership. Miner Knox is one of us now."

"Then he is subject to our law. He is no miner—he is a thief."

Pell said somberly, "That is a serious accusation."

"Old Joe died today as a result of the chloroforming and beating. Before he died he tuned in the ceremony on the visaphone. He identified this man as the one who beat and chloroformed him. He died soon after. His heart couldn't stand the excitement."

Pell looked at Sam. "What have you to say?"

"Would you believe a wild tale like that? Hearsay testimony from a dead man? It's simply an invention."

"Invention?" It was one of the Master Miners. "Why, Hawkins proposed you for your membership."

Ned Hawkins said raspingly, "If it is all hearsay, I suppose you won't object to a search of your ship. The Asteroid jewel that was stolen is probably there."

The pattern was too clear to Sam. It

was of course a frame, a perfect frame, if the jewel had been planted aboard the *Wanderer*. They would find other interesting things, too. The super-drive of the ship would be as useful to a thief as to a Terran Justice man.

They found the jewel carelessly hidden in the *Wanderer's* upholstery.

Sam said, "If you will put us both under the mind-probe, you will learn the truth."

Pell frowned at him. "I know from my own experience that the mind-probe is worthless. I was convicted once by a mind-probe trial. No, we will have a simple trial; we will try you after the fashion of older times. Verbal testimony, evidence, and a jury of Master Miners. We will try you at once. Justice is swift here in the Belt."

SAM KNOX sat hopelessly in a tiny space-dory. Through the view port he could see the twinkling lights of the Asteroid fleet vanishing in the distance. And in his mind he could still hear the voice of Pell, pronouncing sentence like the tolling of some bell of doom.

"Miner Sam Knox, you will be banished forever from the Asteroid belt. If you return, it is the duty of every Miner to ray you on sight. And, if any befriend you, they may share your fate. Your ship and all your possessions are forfeit. You will be placed in a small space-dory with food and fuel for two weeks. If in that time you can come to some larger ship or outpost of civilization, you are to be congratulated. If not, may God have mercy on your soul."

He had lost the *Wanderer*—he had only this tiny dory and two weeks' food. That was bad enough, the chance of wandering forever in space without food or fuel, but worse than that was the thought that he had failed. He had found Pell, and failed to bring him back. He sat for a moment, face in hands, tasting the bitter failure. There was, too, an aching sense of loss when he though of Nancy Rorke.

There was a tarpaulin over his stocks of supplies. He might as well take inventory. He rose and went to the rear of the tiny craft. He pulled back the tarpaulin. Curled among the supplies was a woman, her hair a russet halo of glory. She stood discovered, shyly looking at him. It was Nancy Rorke.

Sam wanted her. Lord, how he wanted her. He crossed and seized her in the solid strength of his arms, crushing his lips and body against hers. "You fool!" he breathed. "You wonderful, glorious little fool!"

She said simply, "I knew you would need me. I found which dory they were to use and stowed away."

Now there was food and water for only a week. All but fuel was now divisible by two. They were far from the usual space-lanes, and the chance of passing craft was microscopically small. Somehow, Sam knew, they must win through. Somehow he must wring defeat from failure.

They were three days out when they saw a ship. It seemed somehow familiar, and it circled them three times before it had decelerated enough to pull alongside the slower dory. The lock opened and Sam propelled the tiny dory inside. Nancy said in amazement. "It is Pell's ship. Do you suppose they know the truth?"

Sam knew it was not that when Pell opened the door of the dory. His voice was curt. "I have extra food and fuel. The ship *Sol Shine* is passing between Mars and the outer planets. You should be able to contact here at these co-ordinates at the time noted." He handed Sam a sheet of astrographic calculations.

Nancy caught at his arm. "Why bring us this?" she asked. "Is it because of me?"

Pell smiled at her. "No, my dear. It was not because of you—or perhaps it was. Perhaps a woman's heart is surer judge than a jury of Miners."

He raised keen eyes to Sam. "Once they found me guilty," he said. "I was not. I cannot rid myself of the belief that perhaps others, too, might not be guilty."

"The others do not know you came?"

"No, else my life would be forfeit."

Sam Knox said wonderingly. "You risked that, for the sake of possible justice?"

Pell inclined his head.

"Why go back? Come to Terra with me."

"I cannot."

"Listen, man." Sam was urgent. "I came from the Department of Terran Justice to find you. The Terran Metals case is re-opened. The new mind-probe is just. Come back and we will find the truth."

A strange look spread over Pell's face. "Terra! The glorious rose-gardens of Terra." He shook himself. "I dare not, but as I have given you life you must promise me this. You must not tell where I am to be found."

Sam Knox said bitterly. "I promise nothing. I came to the Belt to find you." He sidled forward. If he could reach Pell—

A dis-gun rose in Pell's hand. "Be it so. Then I must move on." He closed the door of the dory on them and threw the release that thrust them from the lock of his ship. He left them sitting—watching his ship's lights recede in the darkness.

Nancy put her hand on Sam's arm. Pell's ship was now a speck of light, vanishing in the black. "Never mind Pell. We will go to Terra together."

Sam said, "I had almost convinced him. He wants to go to Terra. You heard him. If I could talk to him again..."

Nancy tugged at his arm. "Sam! What are you thinking of?"

He touched the controls of the space-dory, and it swung in a long curve, doubling back.

"No! Sam, No! They will kill you if you go back. Forget Pell and come with me to the *Sol Shine*."

Sam Knox's jaw was a ledge of granite. "I came for Pell."

The tiny dory leaped forward, nose pointed for the Asteroid Belt.

SAM slid in under no power, using the inertia of the ship, lights off, alongside the *Fleetblast*. He said, "Let's hope your father is alone."

Timas Rorke was alone. He was hard to convince, but his daughter could work wonders with him. "Very well," he grumbled. "I'll see if I can get Pell over here." He shrugged into a space-suit, and slipped his own dory out of the lock. He blasted away to find Pell.

"Look, Sam," Nancy called. "It's the *Aeries*."

The *Aeries* slid by the *Fleetblast*, moving her nets to some other sector of space. The visaphone sounded, *"Aeries calling Fleetblast...Aeries calling Fleetblast..."*

Sam gripped Nancy's arm. "We must not answer. Perhaps he will go on."

For a moment the *Aeries* paused, then it flared an orange trail of acceleration as it headed onward.

And the *Fleetblast's* dory scraped alongside. From the lock stepped Pell and Timas Rorke.

Sam Knox stood, wide-legged, facing Pell, a compact and resolute form. "I came to take you back to Terra."

Their eyes met and searched each other. Pell sighed. "Almost I am willing to trust you. You, too, are a man who will risk life for a principle."

"If you are innocent, I promise you you will be cleared. There is no flaw in the mind-probe now. You know we cannot use the probe at random, but, if you bring charges against those who framed you, we can use the probe to get the truth."

Pell straightened. He seemed to grow taller. "I'll do it."

"You'll do what?" From the opening lock Ned Hawkins came, a dis-gun low in his hand. Behind him were four older men. Sam saw Pell's face grow pale. They were four of the Master Miners, four of those who dispensed justice in the Asteroid Belt.

One of them said gravely, "In the name of all Miners, I arrest you, Pell, for aiding a convicted thief. Have you anything to say before we take you way?"

Hawkins jabbed the muzzle of the dis-gun tight in Sam's back.

And that was a mistake. Men of the Terran Police Services had long been trained to defend against a weapon held too close. Sam Knox whirled, striking up and out with his arm, whirling away from the weapon, and striking with his hand. He stepped forward then, seizing Ned's gun arm in a bone-breaking leverage, and the dis-gun dropped to the floor. He shoved Hawkins away and scooped up his weapon.

Now was the time, he thought, to take Pell and run for it. Perhaps they would not find it important enough to follow. They would not know that contact with the *Sol Shine* was possible.

Then Sam groaned. He had forgotten. Too much time had elapsed, and now he was farther away. The slow space-dory never would be able to reach the coordinates in time to intercept the space-liner.

Somehow he must force the truth. He

lifted the dis-gun. "I'm going to blast you, Ned Hawkins. Before I go I'm going to burn you down. I know you stole the jewel and killed Miner Joe. I know you were jealous and framed me, giving up the jewel as a sacrifice to your jealousy. Tell the truth, Hawkins, and cleanse your soul before you die."

Ned Hawkins pulled back his lips in a dark snarl. "Shoot," he said. "Shoot, you murderer and thief."

A Master Miner said, "We will hunt you down, Knox. We will hunt you to the ends of the galaxy. Even though you kill us all, there will be others to search you out."

"Tie them," Sam Knox directed. Pell obeyed. Sam swung the dis-gun in a compact circle, and the front sight opened the flesh of Ned Hawkins' forearm and let the blood flow.

Sam Knox waved with the gun then at Pell, at the girl and at her father. He said bleakly, "If one of you moves toward the medicine cabinet, as God is in Heaven, I'll ray you down."

He hunkered down on his ankles, a lone figure waiting and watching.

"You devil," Ned's voice struck a high pitch. "*You devil*, give me Penicillin X."

They had not understood till then. The eyes of the bound Master Miners were wide with horror.

Sam gestured with the gun. "Rest easy," he said. "We shall only have to wait an hour at the most."

The red blood that spurted from the arm stopped, and the chronometer ticking in the control room was the only sound in the chamber. Minutes passed, and the arm which had been red with blood was now greying. Swiftly, the infection of space was taking over.

Nancy Rorke said shrilly, "You are not human." She got up and moved for the medicine cabinet. Sam Knox tilted the dis-gun, and the heat ray lanced out and burned a hole in the chair ahead of her. She sat down quickly, with a white face.

Ned Hawkins' eyes were brilliant as a trapped beast. He looked at his greying arm. It was swelling now and becoming painful. His face contorted. He breathed agonizedly.

Pell reached for the medicine cabinet, and Sam burned the knob under his hands.

"You devil!" Ned was breathing hard. Sweat stood on his forehead. "What do you want?"

"The truth."

"I know nothing."

Sam said, "I am going to burn the penicillin. You people can't keep away from the drug. It's either burn the drug or one of you." He pointed the dis-gun at the medicine cabinet in the corner.

"I'll talk—give me the drug—I'll talk!" Ned began to babble in confession.

Sam said mercilessly, "The proof. Where is proof of what you say?"

"On the *Aeries*. There is a false compartment under the control seat. All the stolen goods except the one asteroid jewel are there."

Sam lowered the gun. "Give him the drug quickly, and you will save him for Miner's justice."

As Sam bent to untie them, one of the Miners said, "If the stolen goods are in the *Aeries*, we owe you an apology."

ON THE *Wanderer* Sam Knox finished the astrogation. The jets were warming, for the first blast of fuel that would send him Terra-bound.

Nancy Rorke stood watching over his shoulder. "And what would you do if I would not go with you?"

Sam smiled at her. "I think I'd carry you away regardless."

"I am afraid you would, but I am more afraid you might not, so I go willingly."

From the doorway Pell said quietly, "The jets are perhaps not so charming, but they are ready, too."

Sam fed fuel to the jets, and the *Wanderer* leaped like a hound, heading for home.

A Fiction House Magazine

AGAINST TETRARCH

By A. A. O. Gilmour

On that evil planet, broken men who had once trod Earth knew only two things for sure. One, they all were dying at twenty-five. Two, lovely Mona Darlanan was a dirty traitor.

ROD HARROW pawed futilely at the whirling sands in the gryxon mines on Tetrarch IV. Dimly, as through a dark mist, he could see the line of bobbing lamps that etched the tunnel outlines. He raised his pick for another weary stroke, when he noticed the slave next to him. The poor devil's face was ghastly under its close-fitting helmet. It was deeply lined, worn—and old. Rod saw his twisted grin when the man crumpled against the rocky abutment. A despairing cackle pierced his audiphones:

"I was twenty-five yesterday. I'll be glad to die!"

Rod eased him as he slid to the tunnel floor. He watched in bitter helplessness while the stricken fingers worked their way toward glazing eyes. Dribbles of foam spattered the inside of the man's helmet. Pity and a driving desire for vengeance struggled in Rod's mind when the slave's feeble shout died away. The doomed man's feet beat a weak tattoo on the sandy floor. The beat quickened spasmodically — and stopped.

Smoke issued from the inert nostrils. It clouded the froth-filled helmet. Hazily, the dead face took on a greenish glow. It glimmered like a crucified Satan for a moment, and then fell away to dry embers.

An eerie glow flashed. Rod knew, after only a day in the mines, that the tetrarchian guards were now on their way. Black-browed and huge—with their curiously similar features—they came to drag away the corpse.

A sniveling slave on Rod's left stopped to watch them. A guard turned and raised his weapon suggestively. The sniveler bent to his digging with renewed vigor.

When the tetrarchs had gone another slave slipped in to take the place left vacant by the dead man.

Rod winced in the act of lifting his pick. The gash he had taken in his arm before he was captured on Earth was far from healed. He saw then that the new slave was a woman. She was young and slender. Her hair was glowing gold in the dim lit tunnel. Under her broad forehead her eyes were an unfathomable grey.

"Mona Darlanan!" he breathed in wonderment.

Even in the mines—in the serfdom of Tetrarch—her beauty caught him. This was the girl who would always make him uncomfortable...as it had back in the old days—when Earth was free. She had gone on the stage. He had buried himself in a science laboratory. They had lost touch. When the tetrarchs overran Earth he had lost all knowledge of her. Besides, he had been busy...busy on the most important project of Earth's Thirtieth Century A.D.

"How long have you been here?" he asked. He felt awkward. This was not the way he had pictured their meeting.

"I've been in the mines longer than you have." Her face was quiet, almost submissive. "Don't talk, or the guards will be back. Besides, I want to change places with you."

"Why? Does it make any difference?"

"Yes." She brushed him aside impatiently and turned to the sniveling youth at his side.

"Are you all right?" she asked anxiously.

"They almost killed me," the whimpering slave was trembling.

"Oh, Jerry!"

"I hope we win them over."

"I know now that's the only way." The girl looked about her furtively, "I've been talking to Latham Koler..."

Rod swung his pick with a vicious twist and unearthed a red cloud of Mercury oxide. His reaction boiled like the crimson dust as it mingled with the swirl-

"Bring the slave, Mona Darlanan!"

ing sand in the tunnel. When he'd gotten control of himself he spoke flatly.

"A man just died here," he said. "Don't taint his death with a traitor's name."

"Latham Koler's not a traitor!" the girl flashed. "At least he has enough influence to get some of us out of the mines."

Rod eyed her angrily. The memory of the human torch ripped words from him.

"We're humans! Remember? From Earth! There was a time when a human from Earth would prefer dying to licking a conqueror's boots!"

Mona shrugged her shoulders. She swung a pick on a gryxon outcropping. "That may be," she said briefly, "but we're slaves now. And we die within a day or so of our twenty-fifth birthday. If Latham Koler can get Jerry out of the mines," Mona indicated the youth by her side, "I'll mention his name—I'll do anything—if Jerry can be saved."

Jerry patted her shoulder. "He'll help us, I know," he soothed.

Rod Harrow bent to wisp sandy ice from a blob of red oxide. He put the crimson dust into his pocket.

"You'll be in the slave compartment tonight?" he asked.

The girl turned to her work. "There's no place else except the sleeping cubicles. I suppose I'll be there. When will you be twenty-five?" she asked abruptly.

"One month from today."

"I don't see why..." Mona's voice died away as the guards worked their way down the tunnel. They were herding the humans back to the slave compartment for the night.

ROD HARROW entered the compartment for the first time. He was one of the last on Earth to be captured and sent on the slave ship to Tetrarch IV. His eyes were narrow, waiting for the first sign of inevitable recognition.

He had divested himself of his tight, transparent space suit. Heated space suits were necessary on Tetrarch IV, except in the compartments assigned to human slaves. In them there was air and heat. The planet itself was bitterly cold. Its only atmosphere was inert Krypton which the tetrarchians breathe. Through this dead gas activated sand coursed in eternal swirls.

Slaves were pouring through the door in droves. There were no oldsters in this crowd. None over twenty-five. Earth's two hundred year life span had been considerably reduced.

A hard-thewed, ice-eyed youngster recognized him first. Steel fingers closed on Rod's wrist.

"Rod Harrow!" he whispered. "I'm Don Rickter. I thought you were holding out on Earth."

Rod kept his eyes on a card game that had started. "I left our hideaway in the Rockies when I found out how I could help up here. There was no way of getting here except by the slave route." He paused thoughtfully. "We haven't been idle on Earth—the few of us that are left."

"But, man!" Rickter was dubious. "We're trapped here. Right now those devils are watching us. We can't even talk, but that they know about it. Sometimes even before we say anything. I swear they can read our thoughts."

"It's not quite as bad as that. How about getting some of our old gang together for a game of cards?"

"Just as you say, Rod. But it won't do any good to talk business."

Rod grinned. "Remember the game we all played when we were kids?" He emphasized his remark with a quick gesture.

Rickter's answering grin was sufficient response. "I remember," he said.

"There's a grey-eyed girl around here. Name's Mona."

"Oh, Mona Darlanan. She's hipped on getting that adopted brother of hers out of the mines. The Lord knows why! He's a cowardly little wretch."

"Better keep her from kibitzing if you can. She might have played the same game ...and I don't think she can be trusted."

The first hand had hardly been dealt when Rod threw his cards down and called for a new deck. He emphasized his dissatisfaction by shaking his hand with index finger outstretched, middle finger and thumb conjoined. Then he clenched his fist and shook it at the intent players first with the thumb down and then with the thumb up. His fingers stretched heavenward, except for the index finger when he swore the deck they were using was too dirty.

Don Rickter looked up in mock disgust.

The icy glint in his eyes deepened. Rod centered his displeasure on him. After a slight pause, Rickter argued back. His own gestures were just as aggressive. Soon all of them joined in. The chatter continued, hand after hand, but the real discussion remained in the deaf and dumb sign language—the game all of them had played on Earth before Earth succumbed to the tetrarchs.

"I let myself get caught," Rod commenced, "because of a note smuggled through to me on a tetrarchian space ship."

"Sounds like a trap." Rickter was succint. "We couldn't get a message out from here."

"I don't think it came from here." Rod was equally terse. "I think it came from the survivors of the Hunt."

"What!" Rickter almost forgot to use his hands. "There can't be any survivors."

"But there are." Rod insisted. "They've learned how to live on Tetrach IV even when the oxygen in their space suits is exhausted."

At this point a rustling was heard among the gathering kibitzers. The crowd was drawing back in sullen anger while a tall, black-robed, cadaverous personage forced his way through.

"I'm Latham Koler," he announced, "I understand Rod Harrow is here."

Rod pushed his chair back. Silence settled over the crowd. It was broken suddenly by a scuffle in the far corner of the compartment. A golden-haired girl struggled in the arms of a slave who tried vainly to clamp his hand over her mouth.

"He's here all right." Mona Darlanan's disheveled hair fell over her shoulders. She pushed the slave from her and struck him sharply. Her clear voice shattered the quiet.

"He's here. And he's plotting rebellion. I just realized they've been talking to each other in sign language!"

THE WALLS of the slave compartment seemed to glow with thousands of almost microscopic specks of violet light. A scant moment later the door to the compartment burst open and the guards entered. They marched with beautiful precision, calmly, impassively.

Rod watched them as he rose from his chair. He took quick note of the masks they wore to protect themselves from the air and then he launched himself head first.

His skull landed with a satisfying plunk in the middle of the first guard's stomach. His reaching arms clasped the tetrarchian's legs just below the knees and the tetrarchian landed on the floor—hard. He slipped the guard's blaster from its holster on the way down, knocked the tetrarchian mask loose and rolled to meet the next attacker. His turn was just in time to miss a pair of boots—lead-heeled—that were jamming down on his head. As he twisted, Rod saw another boot. It was coming toward him in the full arc of a fast kick. Rod caught it and twisted. He was slightly surprised when the ankle turned a full three hundred and sixty degrees. The guard fell heavily.

He'd gotten to his feet, blaster in hand, when they rushed him. With a savage grin, Rod let go. It was good to put electronic slugs in the advancing guards. A small return payment for the slave who had glowed to his death! Rod wasn't sure but what his eyes were playing him tricks. He swore the guard was still coming at him. The one with the hole in him! Only the unmasked tetrarch was inert on the floor.

He aimed carefully and let go again. The guard was still coming. The lights went out entirely. Rod blasted four times in quick succession, then jumped and twisted sidewise to the floor. As a feint it did him little good. The guards were up, on him—including the one with five holes in his carcass. Rod was held in a vise-like grip while they kicked the blaster out of his hand and zipped a space suit over his frame.

As he was hustled out of the compartment he heard Rickter's voice. "I'm sorry, Rod. But I guess it's useless—and I couldn't have helped you. I'll be twenty-five next month!"

"I'll be twenty-five myself," Rod yelled back. "We'll have a swell birthday party."

The last sound he heard was Mona's hysterical laughter.

The heavy door closed softly and Rod found himself in the stinging sand of outside Tetrarch. But only for a moment. The guards took off their masks with ob-

vious relief and guided him to a small building some fifty yards from the slave compartment.

He was thrust through a circular aperture and turned to see himself viewed by an elderly tetrarch. It spoke with the peculiar sibilance with which the tetrarchians handled human speech.

"You are a rassh yonge manss, Ross Harros. Howefser, there iss ssomething I musst ssay to you. With no one elsse of my rasce pressent."

A door back of the tetrarch opened silently. Latham Koler slid noiselessly through the opening. Rod scowled into the quisling's peering owl eyes. It was an effort to resist the impulse to cover both of them with a left jab before crossing his right on the bony chin.

"I'm sorry our helmets keep me from spitting in your face," he remarked.

The tetrarch motioned Koler forward.

"You are not as mature as I expected." Koler's voice rustled like his dark garments, "And your wits need more exercise. You'd be quarry for the Hunt at this moment, if I hadn't interceded on your behalf."

"Quarry?" Rod's eyebrows raised.

"Yes. Every so often one of the hotheads decides to escape. The tetrarchs love it. Sometimes, they deliberately give them the chance."

HE pointed to the oxygen cannisters attached to the back of Rod's space suit. "The cylinders in our human space suits supply enough air to last for eight hours. When the air is exhausted it seems to be a natural reaction to rip the suit open.

"Imagine breathing this stuff!" Koler grasped a handful of the sand swirling about them. "That's the climax of the Hunt. We—uh—they allow about an hour's head start and then stalk the quarry. The idea is to catch him just as he rips his suit. And to get him to the operating chamber just before he dies.

"The tetrarchs are brilliant technicians, even if they are weak on theory. So I've helped them. We are anxious to find out why humans exposed to gryxon die on their twenty-fifth birthday. They think research on still-living humans will give them the answer."

The tetrarch waved an arm. "He is a good sscientisst," he commented.

Koler's rustling voice paused while the owl-eyes continued to peer. "But that's of minor interest. I've persuaded them to save you."

"Why?"

"You have influence." Latham Koler's voice rustled while the tetrarch nodded approvingly. "We are well aware you were President of the Terran Science Association. And that you served in the terran army with distinction in the fruitless fight against the tetrarchs. And we know that you have thousands of devoted followers."

Koler paused. He peered with bloodshot eyes to see if his remarks were taking effect. "The tetrarchs are anxious to expand their conquests. They need those that are spending their time guarding the humans now. If you will throw in with us—the rest will follow..."

"As slaves! With time hanging a glowing torch over our heads! Try another tack, Koler."

The bitter anguish in Rod's voice tightened the skin on the traitor's cadaverous skull. Unconsciously, he stepped back before Rod's overwhelming fury.

"Some day we'll rid ourselves of the tetrarchs. The time will come when Earth again will be free. When it comes, Koler, kill yourself. At least you'll have your choice of the various kinds of death."

Koler peered doubtfully at the tetrarch who nodded and walked to the aperture. A guard stood at attention.

"Bring the sslave, Mona Darlanan," the tetrarch commanded.

When she entered Rod faced her impassively. "You've turned traitor too, I see."

The girl faced him. She looked remote and submissive, but somehow untouched. Her hand sought unconsciously to brush back the heavy golden hair under the confines of her helmet.

"I have a brother," she said simply, "the baby of our family. We're all that's left. My parents adopted him to look after him. I've taken over."

"Sslave Darlanan," the tetrarch interrupted, "we wissh you to convinsce Ross Harros of the sstupidity of further resisstansce."

"If you do," Koler's voice rustled, "perhaps Jerry—your brother—can be put to work in the compartment instead of the mines."

Mona turned her breath-taking beauty on Rod. Her eyes glowed with passionate conviction. "Don't you see," she said softly, "we only make things worse by resisting? The tetrarchs want more slaves. Let them get them—from other planets—other galaxies. If we help them perhaps they will send us back to Earth. You've *got* to understand."

BEFORE HER his reason was powerless. Unconsciously, his arms encircled her waist. He couldn't bring himself to fight her.

She dropped her head on his chest. Then she raised her eyes, "You will help—with you and Latham Koler in the confidence of the tetrarchs..."

The spell was destroyed. Rod stiffened. "Not Koler!" He grasped her by the wrists and thrust her away. "Koler!" His voice deepened in contempt.

"We knew him on Earth before these slave-makers lulled us into a false sense of security with their friendship and their gadgets. Koler never amounted to anything then. He was always on the fringe of things. Here, he's venting his spite on the few of us that are left—and he's gotten that opportunity by toadying to these lousy, so-called powers."

"No sso fasst," the tetrarch put out a restraining arm. "We are simply following the desstiny by ensslaving you. Our rasce iss to be the overlords of all the galassies. You can have a sshare if you wissh."

"I can see your point though," Rod ignored the tetrarch to face Mona, "but don't you see there are some things more important than your brother—that in spite of him—you can't turn traitor?

"Do you remember, Mona, how the tetrarchs first came to Earth—how friendly they were and how they loaded us with those amazing labor-eliminating gadgets? Press a button and everything was done—power for our gyros, heat for our buildings, force for our machines—anything and everything. With all our work eliminated we lost our watchfulness. They never let us know what powered the gadgets—we never knew about gryxon power until the tetrarchs took over.

"We found out about gryxon then—in the mines. Once it's sheathed by radium and the radium sheathed with lead—it's harmless. But—when human life is used to handle the raw ore—!"

The vibrant timbre of Rod's voice seemed to die away to death's whisper, "Well, we all expect to die when we're twenty-five...and time's passing. Try weighing what you might loosely call the human race against one brother!

"And as for you—" Rod stepped forward quickly and slammed his fist against the air tank attached to Koler's space suit. He wrenched it loose and threw it away. Not waiting to see the result, he stepped out of the aperture and gave the guard the same treatment.

He raced through the city, wondering why he was not pursued. Then it came to him. There would be a Hunt.

As he ran across rocky ground he wondered how Koler was taking to a silica diet.

His course was hazily sketched in his mind. The smuggled note that had started him from Earth had not been too specific. It couldn't have been. There was too much chance of its being intercepted. But he had a good working knowledge of Tetrarch's surface. The problem was to get to the Survivors—those who had somehow escaped the gryxon mines and escaped the hunting tetrarchians—and in getting to them he had to throw his pursuers off the trail. There was a test in this, he was sure. He thought he had certain clues to that.

Why, for instance, did a tetrarch with a slug in him keep on fighting? Why did the unearthly glow precede the coming of the guards? He felt he ought to be glad about that eerie flash. It was a warning—something like a rattlesnake's.

His course led him to rocky foothills. He had skirted them when another gnawing thought came. When did Mona adopt a brother? He'd never known of one. He shrugged the thought aside. He was coming to a broad pass. He kept his course straight, for it was still dark. When dawn came he would seek cover—or did darkness mean anything to the tetrarchians? It probably didn't.

He covered the pass and worked his way up the far right of three towering mountains. It was cold—colder even than the bitter keenness of the level lands. He notched the heating element in his suit to the top position and continued his climb. In the deep darkness that preceded dawn he felt his way along the edge of narrow, jagged ravines. The swirling sands made sight impossible. His progress became slower.

He had reached almost to the top when dawn glimmered over the horizon. Far down over the rocky crags intermittent flashes glowed. Rod sat back on his haunches and watched their approach.

In the dawn's half-light the glowing lights dimmed but he was able to mark their progress. Assuming their current speed and allowing for lost trails and going off course, they would overtake him in about two hours—if he continued at his past speed. They had established a nice calculation — precisely balanced to catch him at the moment his air supply hit zero.

He would soon be fair bait for the operating room.

He watched the flaring lights more intently. As they swarmed over the foothills they seemed to lose some of their capacity for glimmering. Rod nodded comprehension and turned to clamber up the almost vertical slope.

It was hard going and he was in plain view by the time he reached the top. Up here the shifting sand was finer. There was less of it, and it hugged the ground more closely than in the lowlands.

Another hour passed before the flames sensed him. They were working toward him but more slowly. They had lost all semblance of glimmer and had taken on the aspects of a solid sheet, of flame. Rod glanced back and noted there was no sign of any figures following the flashes. He nodded decisively.

The facts had fallen into a definite pattern!

BEFORE HIM stretched a plateau, rock-strewn and sand-swept. Beyond it, the topmost peak of the range towered to challenge the pale tetrarchian sun. Rod checked his air supply. There was just enough to get him across the plateau.

He examined the heating element in his suit more carefully and probed an exploratory finger across the pocket over his short ribs. The package was still there. The gash under his arm was bothering him again. Well and good! Maybe there would be a chance for it to heal properly, if he ever won through.

He started across the plateau at a fast trot.

He glanced back at first. But after an hour's steady progress there was no need to. He knew the flames were gaining on him. His breathing was thick and labored. The air gauge in his suit was oscillating at zero. As he slowed the pursuing flames speeded forward. One shot ahead of the rest and circled over him like a gleam-buzzard. It watched him stagger while it poised motionless. Then it swooped.

It darted toward him. He paused and swung an almost drunken punch at it. His fist went through it and he recoiled, stricken at the terrific shock that traveled along his arm. The flame retreated sullenly to continue circling.

He drew a deep breath and held it. The peak wavered before him. It was close now. His head throbbed and the gash in his arm had opened. Warm blood was seeping through his sleeve. His leaden feet refused to go further. He fell to his knees and crawled toward the base of the peak. Sobbing, each breath a burning hell, he worked his way over the last few yards. He reached the rocky slope and scrambled up crabwise until he collapsed.

The hovering flames paused. They reached glowing tentacles toward him while he ripped frantically at his cloying, confining space suit.

He rolled over on his back when the fastenings gave way. The flames huddled closer in the intense cold of the upper slope when Rod shorted the heating element. It glowed white while he ripped his pocket in a desperate search for red dust—red oxide from the gryxon mines.

His face was blue when he dropped the dust on the white hot heat coil. The red dust changed to gleaming droplets of mercury. Oxygen—rich pure oxygen was released in the change. He breathed the life-giving fumes through pinched nostrils.

When strength came pouring back into his air-starved system he advanced on the

weakened flames. They hugged the rocks —inert in the savage cold of the mountain. Some of them had changed to glowing liquid. One, higher on the slope than the rest, had frozen to an opalescent solid. When the newly generated oxygen flowed over them they exploded harmlessly to grey powder. As the last one disappeared Rod turned to face a grinning, space-clad figure.

"Nice work, Rod," the figure called, "I see you answer your mail."

"Bill Williamson!" Rod grinned his relief. "Oblige me, pal, by not writing any more notes."

Williamson was beside him. He slipped a fresh cannister of air into place on Rod's space suit and suported him while they clambered further up the mountainside.

"That oxygen trick!" he exulted. "That's a nice wrinkle! They sounded like popcorn going off."

Williamson led him to a cave entrance buried deep in a gorge. The concealed opening was covered with a heavy windproofed canvas. They entered through the double fold.

"Oxygen equipped!" Rod stared his surprise.

"We have our creature comforts." Williamson unlatched his helmet. "Crude but effective. We've been heating mercury oxide. There's lots of it around. Set awhile —while I call the gang. They'll be glad to see you."

When the handshaking was over, Rod faced the hardbitten, sand-burned Survivors. These were the men who, like himself, had come through the testing. They had found the way to live on this planet —in the teeth of the conquerors of Earth. Now they needed him—needed his genius to guide them along the path to freedom —to conquest over the hated tetrarchs.

ROD looked at the intent faces about him. "First," he said, "I want the answers to some questions. I've figured part of it out myself—check me if I go wrong.

"The Tetrarchs are not human in shape. They're really flame-like gobs of energy —probably phosphoric in nature. For some reason, they fashioned plastic bodies which resembled human figures. They have always used these bodies in their dealings with humans—unless they're hunting."

Williamson nodded approvingly. "We stole a few of those imitation bodies. They're all pretty much the same, except for the masks. The ones they use on Earth are built in. Here in Tetrarch they're removable. They fashioned them to conceal their real structure after they investigated Earth. We humans never knew of them until they made their appearance in camouflage. They studied us first, devised the body and then established relations."

"Yeah," a Survivor interrupted, "When they took us in, they took us over—but good! They couldn't have done it any other way—with their one lousy town on a two-bit planet."

"Under normal temperature conditions," Rod continued, "they're gaseous. As it gets colder they become less active and then they turn to liquid."

"That's right, chief, and when it gets really cold," another Survivor added, "they turn to solid. When we win this fight I'm going to get me a tetrarch, freeze it, and use it for a light in my fishing lodge."

"Oh no, you're not," a barrel-chested earthman, incongruously named Bunny, informed him, "you're going to contribute it to help spell Mona Darlanan's name in lights on Broadway."

"What' that again?" Rod's tone had sharpened.

"Mona Darlanan, boss. She's the greatest actress of them all—bar none." Bunny grinned disarmingly. "Bet you didn't know you was her messenger boy."

"That's right, Rod." Bill Williamson picked up Rod's discarded space suit. "Here," he suppressed a smile with difficulty, "she's put a note on your helmet latching. It's in code and says she expects to get called in to start you on your way."

There was no stopping Williamson's laughter, "Look! It says here she's known you a long time and you're an old sobersides. She expects to hug you before you start out and she hopes you'll like it."

"Nice goin', chief. She didn't hug me." Bunny was glum on this point.

"Wait a minute, guys." Rod silenced the laughter. "You're all wrong. That girl betrayed me—she's gone over to the tetrarchs—lock, stock and barrel."

"Let's hear about it, Rod." Williamson was intent.

Rod recounted briefly what had happened when Mona Darlanan had read his sign language.

When he was through, Bill Williamson was silent for a long moment. Then he spoke slowly, "Rod, you're the only one who ever arrived on Tetrarch knowing of our existence. As a matter of fact, Mona was responsible for smuggling that note aboard the space ship—the one that brought you here. You came close to giving the whole show away with your sign language gag. Mona Darlanan was smart enough to realize that and she took the one sure way to get you on your way to us."

"I don't catch." Rod Harrow's face was a study in bewilderment.

"I'm not surprised." Williamson was half smiling. "Mona does that to guys. We first got in touch with her when one of the boys—he's gone the glowing way now—used one of our captured humanoid suits and made like a guard. We selected Mona as our contact because she's completely and utterly loyal. And she's probably the finest actress there is.

"To get herself solid with the tetrarchs she 'adopted' that little jerk, Jerry Wilson. That was to convince them that she was sincere."

Rod, listening intently, nodded—he understood the why of that gnawing thought back on the lowlands now.

"She keeps us informed of what the tetrarchs are planning—and she's got them hoodwinked—particularly that rat, Latham Koler.

"Guys are always trying to escape from the mines. Sometimes they survive. When they do there's always some message from her. When they go she tells them how to get to us. But they have to promise to destroy the note if it looks as though they won't get through."

"She didn't say anything like that to me," Rod flared.

"She had faith in you," Williamson said shortly, "besides she knew you knew."

"If you say so, Bill. I admit I missed the boat." Rod's thoughts were veering crazily.

"But to get back to business, Rod," Bill Williamson said, "I don't know how long we're going to be safe here. Our one lucky string is the tetrarch's principle of the Hunt."

"I was going to ask you about that." Rod was now alert. "Why don't the tetrarchs account for every human that escaped?"

"Well, boss," the barrel-chested Bunny spoke, "they figure, how can they lose? All of us are due for the torch parade once we hit twenty-five."

"Further," Williamson added, "from the info I've gotten from Mona, the tetrarchs use the Hunt to test themselves. For each quarry caught without aid of any kind a tetrarchian guard gets promoted. If the guard himself is overcome—on his home field—so to speak—the idea is they're well rid of him. That means a constant process of self selection . . . And it leaves us facing highly dangerous adversaries."

THE canvass covering the cave entrance rippled and a Survivor entered. "Look alive, pals," he said, "there's another guy looks like he's going to get through to us."

"Hope he makes it," the barrel-chested Bunny rose. "It's my turn to put out the welcome mat."

"What does he plan to do?" Rod turned to Bill Williamson.

"'Bout the same thing I did for you. If the fellow gets far enough along, the tetrarchs will retreat, or freeze, and the big fellow will bring him in."

"Why don't we help the guy?"

"What do you mean? What can we do?"

"You said we had plenty of oxygen, didn't you?"

"Yeah. We got it stored in tanks we stole from the tetrarchs."

"Well, c'mon, Bill. Let's explode a few or four."

"Lor Lumme! Tetrarch popcorn! What all will we need, Rod?"

"About eight men. Two teams — two each — for diversion. And four men for the push. We'll try it small scale for size."

The oxygen tanks were quickly distributed. Rod gave eight Survivors rapid instructions. "I'll give you ten minutes to get in position," he finished, "Williamson and I will watch from the top heights."

By the time Rod and Williamson had taken their position high on the mountain-

side the staggering human had won to within a hundred yards of the final slope. The flames were circling—darting forward — retreating — only to renew the attack. They were so intent on their prey they missed the helpless second figure—until he set up a hoarse scream for help.

When the flames realized there was a second quarry they hesitated—but not for long. If anything, the second man was farther gone than the one who was now scrambling up the slope.

The new quarry was bent over a cylinder of some sort. His legs kicked feebly. His arms were jerking spasmodically as he tried to tear his suit fastenings.

Almost half the flames raced to him. Tentacles outstretched, they swooped — into the oblivion of hissing oxygen. A few tried to escape. Another human stepped from behind a concealing boulder. Rod watched him play an oxygen stream over them like a pest-sprayer.

The flames which had remained behind reacted instinctively. They retreated. Their vanguard exploded before two more humans who rose from the sand-misted shadows of a narrow gorge in the plateau.

They broke then. They fled in wild disorder in the only direction open. Now, four men rose from concealed positions to bar their way.

The annihilation was complete!

On the heights above, Williamson was dancing a war jig. "We wowed 'em, Rod," he screeched. "We wowed 'em. Look at that grey powder! Look at it! Them's dead tetrarchs, me boy."

He pounded Rod on the back in complete forgetfulness of the glowing doom. "When we get back to earth I'm gonna marry me a nice girl. And I'm gonna throw pop corn parties every night in the week. And I'm gonna invite all the neighbors. And when the kernels go 'Pop' I'm gonna say, 'That's what we did to the tetrarchs.'"

He was still pounding Rod's back when Bunny came puffing up. "You'd better come in a hurry, boss," he said, "that guy down there wants to talk to you and he ain't got much time left."

Rod frowned. "Lets go," he said briefly.

He ran down the slope to the inert figure that lay like a blade of mown grass at the base.

When the others arrived he was kneeling by the fallen slave, suporting him by the head and shoulders. There was no mistaking the ghastly pallor spreading over the waxen face.

His breathing was jerky—almost spasmodic as he whispered, "And then they worked on Rickter. They had grown suspicious when things started to disappear . . . when more slaves escaped and never got caught."

His breathing paused. The skin on the man's forehead lost its waxy pallor. It became dry—harsh—yellow-tinged.

Rod braced him more firmly—the tortured chest heaved again. "When they found out . . . about the Survivors . . . they decided to finish us. They had been working to find out about a cure for the gryxon burn. Koler worked with them and discovered how to make it work faster . . . said it was a catalyst . . . forced us to eat it . . . one by one."

"Mona?" Rod asked gently.

"They've saved her and a few more... going to experiment... operate...say humans no use as slaves...too stiff-necked ...make better guinea pigs...we're finished."

THE slave tried to speak again. But his chest was rigid, fixed. His eyes filmed. He ceased the struggle.

Rod laid him down, still gently and straightened him, crossing his hands over his chest. Smoke came in a fine haze from the flaring nostrils. Bloody froth flew from between the drawn lips. The Satanic grin came with the onslaught of the greenish glow.

And then—there were ashes!

"We're ready, boss." Bunny's voice was quiet.

"Yes," Williamson's voice was equally low, "we've got time until we're twenty-five—to exterminate every tetrarch on the planet. The best we can hope for is a dead draw. Shall we get started, Rod? There's little time left to us."

"We'll have the advantage of surprise," Rod agreed, "unless we walk into a trap. But I think we can outmaneuver them."

He turned quickly. "Anyone here within a week of their twenty-fifth birthday?"

"I don't think so, Rod."

"Anyone within a month of their twen-

ty-fifth birthday who is also from the Mediterranean section of Earth?"

He paused. Their silence gave him his answer.

"Good," he said, "in this game we've still got our hole card.

"Now, remember this one thing. Our objective is the science building — they operate there—and that's where they'll store the catalyst. Anything else is secondary.

"We'll try a feint on the slave compartment. We'll drive in force on all communication centers. I'll make maps showing their locations—I made it my job to get that info before I left Earth. And we've got to kill every tetrarchian space ship crew either at the same time or immediately after we destroy communications. We've none too much oxygen for a job of this size. That's our main weapon. So make it count. We'll use what blasters we have. And if you run into any tetrarchians with space suits on aim for the mask. That's all you need to do before you give him the explosion treatment. Is everything clear?"

"All we need is to know who's going to lead who to where," Bunny said.

"I'll have plans drawn up at headquarters in half an hour," Rod promised. "Meantime leave a twenty-percent reserve of oxygen here and break the rest down from tanks to all the cannisters you can get your hands on."

Rod walked rapidly up the hill outlining details of the battle plan to Williamson as they entered the cave.

The slave compartment feint-party left first. Communications-destroyers left in four groups. Space-hangar attack-parties followed. Under Bunny's direction, they had managed to rig up a fairly creditable camouflage.

There was an argument about command of the main force against the science building. Rod had assumed it without second thought. Williamson was obdurate.

"I don't care who handles it, Rod," he said, "but you can't. If anything goes wrong there'll be no one left to carry the fight. You've got to stay here until we control the lowlands."

"I'll be twenty-five next month," Rod said briefly. "So it can't matter much one way or the other."

"Sorry, Rod. I forgot about that. I've only six weeks to go myself. One of the youngsters will have to take over the reserve."

"Then you and I will take a whack at this together."

Williamson draped two cannisters of oxygen about his waist. "Let's go." he said.

Their pace down the mountain was swift but unhurried. On the plateau Williamson scuffled tetrarchian ashes whenever he found them. They were fast disappearing in the swirling sand.

They scattered their force when they left the foothills. There was an occasional tetrarch flame to draw the men's fire.

THEY encountered their first resistance within blaster range of the mines. From the roof of the slave compartment purple blaster arcs rained down. The fire was scattered at first but it increased in volume when the main body of the Survivors surged into view.

The tetrarchs were no mean marksmen. The stench of burning, smoking flesh tainted the atmosphere.

As the men broke for cover Rod demonstrated counter measures. He took position behind a corner wall and fired three times. Each shot punctured a tetrarchian mask. When the enemy huddled to replace them he lobbed an oxygen cannister over the roof and blasted it as it poised at the height of its arc. The hissing gas struck quickly. He saw one of the unprotected tetrarchs collapse. Its imitation body toppled over the parapet to the ground. A Survivor wiggled toward it and snatched a blaster from its limp hand. He accounted for three more on the roof before they killed him.

His sacrifice gave his fellows an opportunity. While he had engaged the tetrarchs two Survivors wedged themselves in the corner of a supporting abutment. One had clambered on the other's shoulders. The men scrambled up this living ladder and over the parapet.

In the midst of a wild melee support came — through the roof. The feinting force that had attacked earlier had taken the interior of the slave compartment. They cut through the roof when they heard the scuffling. Oxygen roared through the

opening into Tetrarch's dead atmosphere. The struggle was brief—and without quarter to the tetrarchs.

Rod, meanwhile, had reorganized his forces and directed them to proceed to the science building and surround it.

His Survivors were better equipped now. They had gained blasters. The feint on the slave compartment had won them the oxygen-making equipment. It had diverted the enemy from Rod's main objective. And the men of the feint party now stood ready to reinforce him.

A courier dashed to him. Bunny was reporting that all space ship hangars had been immobilized. He had then turned to assist in the communications clean up. He wanted further orders.

The orders were brief: to explode all tetrarchians encountered while proceeding to the science building.

His own men waited in silence. They waited before a quiet, ominous building. It stood—a squat, sullen pile—a citadel of science perverted—of infamous torture.

And from it—through a door quickly opened and as quickly shut—a human emerged. A human who limped and snuffled as he crossed the clearing toward the Survivors.

"Harrow," he called, "I'm an emissary to Rod Harrow. I want to speak to Rod Harrow."

"All right. What is it?' Rod strode forward despite Williamson's restraining hand.

The whimpering slave gathered himself together and spoke as if he had memorized his piece.

"The tetrarchs say if you'll surrender yourself they'll spare the rest of the humans."

"Bluff! A miserable bluff!" Williamson had come forward blazing with indignation. His contempt at the servile gestures of the slave was mounting. "We'll kill every tetrarch on the planet—and you with them, if you're not careful. You can sniffle on back there and tell them that their position is hopeless."

"But don't you see," the coward was almost in tears, "they've got the catalyst." The tears, no longer denied, streaked down his face. "At first it would work in eight hours no matter what our age. Now, Latham Koler's got it so it can work in five min—O-oh! I've been hit!"

Rod caught a quick glimpse of Latham Koler's saturnine grin. He had appeared at the building opening for a moment and fired.

Rod couldn't see the weapon he had used but its results were plain. A tiny dart had pierced the coward's helmet. It protruded from the back of his neck.

Williamson plucked the dart and held it in his hand. "It doesn't look dangerous," he said. But Jerry had collapsed.

Rod pointed to the fallen coward. A familiar pallor was spreading over his features.

"The glow! Rod! Look at it! It's working already!"

"It's a stepped-up catalyst all right." Rod was thoughtful. "That dart is really a hypo needle. Lets get to cover and see what we can do about it."

When Rod outlined his plan Williamson was adamant. They couldn't go through with it. He, Williamson, wasn't going to permit it. But Rod had his way.

They picked the best marksmen arbitrarily. There were volunteers in plenty to storm the building if the ruse worked.

It took a little time to stuff their clothes with sand. Williamson checked them personally to make sure that the layer under their clothes was at least three inches thick.

When everything was ready Rod strode forward like Achilles taunting the Trojans. He exhausted his vocabulary. All the vituperative terms he could remember and a few that came to him extempore were hauled out to describe the tetrarchs. He told them they would be frozen to provide lights for their own mines—that the humans would break them into small chunks to make jewels for Earth's women.

It worked. It was more than tearach nature could take.

DOORS opened for a fleeting second. The vengeful flames showered him with darts.

In that brief interval they were met with withering blasts from the marksmen. The humans had brought the oxygen machinery up from the slave compartmene. It streamed toward the building like water from a pressure hose.

At the same instant the volunteers rushed. For an instant the fight teetered in the balance—and then they were in.

Rod bristled with sand-blunted darts as he battered his way through the honeycombed building, searching for the operating chamber. He burst through the entrance—to face Mona Darlanan.

They hadn't had time to work on her. But they'd done their best. They'd tied her to a vertical platform first.

The dart in her breast had drawn blood!

Latham Koler squirmed from behind the platform. His cadaverous face was transfixed with the grin of a skeleton skull. He aimed a blaster point blank at Rod and fired.

The streaming arc buried itself harmlessly in the three-inch sand layer over Rod's chest. And he was on Koler like a berserk.

He broke the traitor's helmet first. And forced fingers and thumb around his windpipe. When the peering eyes protruded and the thin-lipped mouth hung agape Rod lifted the dart gently from Mona Darlanan's body.

He jammed it down Koler's throat.

Williamson came pounding in. "We've got them all, Rod. Tetrarch IV is in our hands!"

Rod was frantically tearing at his sleeve. "Get me a knife," he ordered, "quickly."

He ripped the sleeve off. As more and more Survivors came piling into the room he ordered liters of distilled water.

Meanwhile he was busily plying the scalpel Williamson brought to him. The gash on his arm had never quite healed was getting probed. Rod dug with the scalpel as though he were going after a bullet.

The small platinum capsule he forced from the cut in his arm was not unlike one.

He glanced anxiously at Mona's face. The pallor had gone. A harshening of her exquisite skin had taken its place.

The contents of the capsule dissolved in five liters of water in a matter of seconds. Rod picked an unfilled dart from a litter on a table. He filled it with his newly made solution and injected it in the girl's arm.

They waited.

"Will it do any good, Rod?" Williamson was solemn in the quiet room.

"I don't know. We developed it on Earth in our lab in the Rockies. There was plenty of gryxon in our machines. Volunteers exposed themselves to it. That capsule, Bill, was purchased at the price of martyrdom."

"If it works, our race is saved."

"That's how they felt about it. We found that raw gryxon was instant death to humans over twenty-five. Those under twenty-five were immune unless they came from stock that matured early—as the Mediterranean peoples. They succumbed before twenty-five. That was what really gave us our answer. We knew that ankylosis—joining of certain spinal vertebrae—occurred earlier in humans that matured earlier—and that age twenty-five was the time for the joinder to occur. So we turned to the serums that had increased human life spans by retarding ankylosis—and developed this one."

They studied Mona's face again.

WAS it possible that the yellow tinge was stayed—was turned to waxen ivory? The girl's breast rose and fell—ever so gently.

"I concealed our serum," Rod went on slowly, "from the tetrarchs by burying it in my arm. I had to get a hypo needle before I could use it here."

"Have I had a fever, Rod?" Mona's grey eyes were open. "Or is this delirium?"

Rod Harrow crossed to her swiftly. He cradled her head in his arms. She was smiling again—relaxed.

Then he turned to Williamson. "Line 'em up, Bill. With five liters we can inoculate every human on Tetrarch IV. There'll never be a gryxon glow again.

"And as soon as a company has had all men injected, send them to the cave to bring back the reserves. We'll need their help."

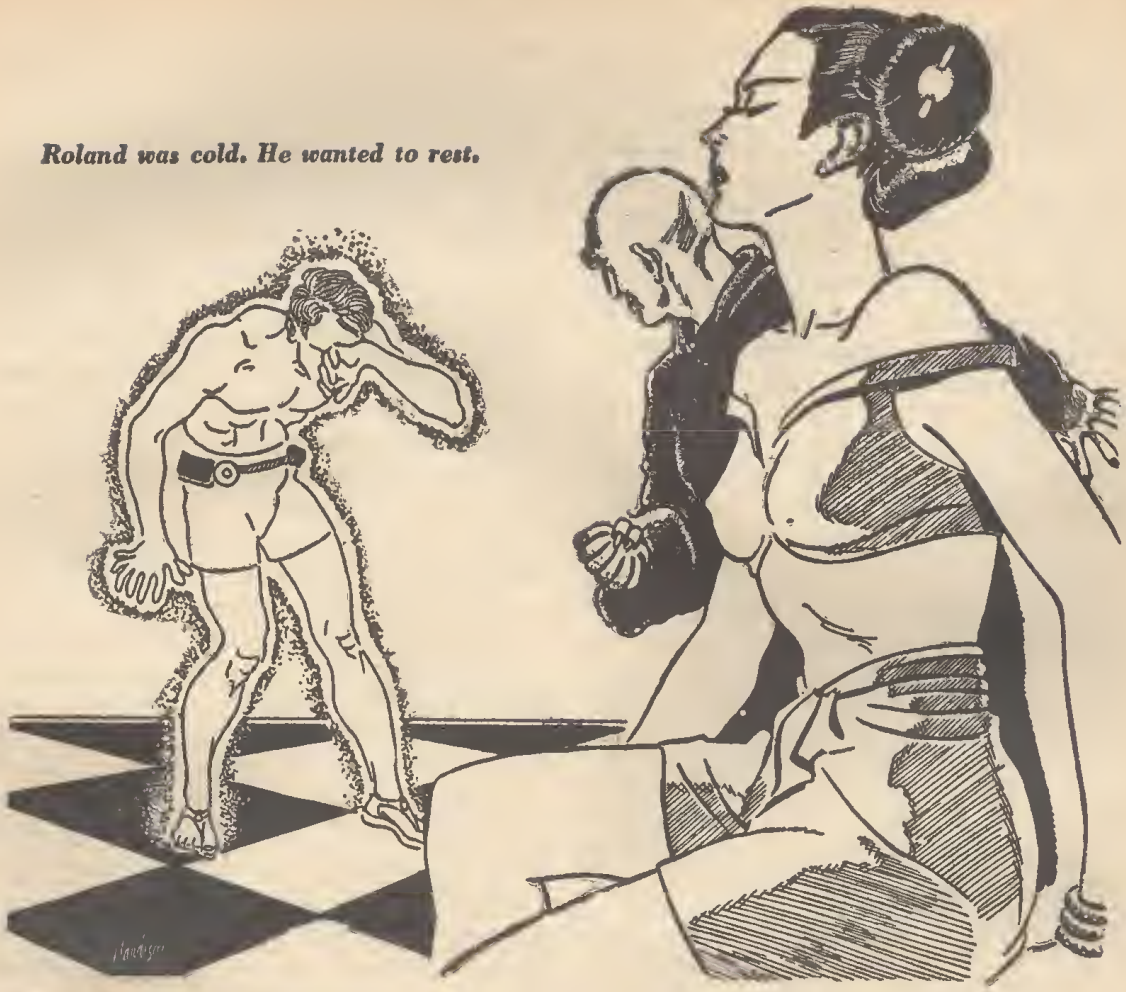
"To celebrate?" Williamson wanted to know.

"Not particularly." Rod was impatient. "We'll have to do some planet cleaning."

"Planet cleaning!"

"Right! We're ready now to wipe the tetrarchs off our Earth."

Roland was cold. He wanted to rest.



Assignment In The Dawn

By BRYCE WALTON

There stood Roland, deep beneath a static, dying civilization, fiercely ready to destroy it—and himself, if need be—for love of Frances. Yet a question nagged him. Who was she—and who was he?

HIS CONSCIOUSNESS FILTERed in slowly. It stirred like roiled water, and the first lucid cycle of cause and effect in associative memory was beginning. There was a kind of awful searching loneliness — but that was broken by the pleasantly soft voice of the woman who asked, "Is he waking?"

A sweet clear voice. It drew him as if it were some part of him that was missing. She could give meaning to that lonely despair. If he could only remember—. A man answered tensely, "He's waking, all right. Check the spy-circuit again, Fran. Their newly developed rapport-clan is dangerous. They might find out about our new Adam."

Adam?

He heard light footsteps fade off and return. "Circuit's clear, Billy Boy." A pause. "He's attractive, isn't he?"

"Uh-huh."

He heard the man muttering close to his ear. He felt some kind of pressure withdrawn from about his head. There was a sharp, clenching pain, and a flash of agonizing brilliance.

"Well, that's it, Fran," the man breathed heavily.

He felt her warm soft hand moist on his forehead. Why did she remove it? But he heard her say, "All right, Superman. Open your eyes and see the light."

Adam? Superman?

He blinked blindly in the newness of the light until the small naked cubicle and the two people in it clarified. He looked at her first, beauty and warmth. She smiled brightly and winked, a small delicate but full-bodied figure in shorts, bra and sandals, and a lot of olive skin. But their eight-fingered hands! He looked at his own hands. Eight fingers. What—?

He studied the man. He was gaunt and bald, very sad and cynical with his lower lip stuck out. He put out a thin white hand and said sardonically, "I'm Berti. This is Frances. And I suppose you'd like to know who *you* are?"

He shrugged as he turned his eyes back to the woman and openly appreciated her. She blushed, and he was pleased. Finally he answered the man. "That depends on who I am. An amnesiac is supposed to have good reasons for not remembering."

The man frowned. "You've never had a name. And you're not an amnesiac—not exactly. We've stored your brain with plenty of information. And it will soon become properly integrated as you apply it. But what would you prefer as a label?"

He had never had a name. Somehow, he figured that he should have had one. He shrugged again. "If I've never had a name, it must not be very important."

"Peculiar personality," muttered Berti. "Not uninteresting."

"That's wonderful," giggled Frances. "Now I can pick something that will make an adorable nickname. How about Roland? Then I can call you Rolly."

He nodded and sat up while she giggled eagerly. He looked at his body. He seemed to know all about his body, yet he had never been conscious of it before, somehow. Translucent shorts and sandals fitted well to a tall, muscled form that he was proud to display to Frances. Did she like his body? That was the important thing.

His eyes shifted back and forth from the woman to the man. Finally he said quietly, "We've got to come to it. What do you want me to do?"

Berti's sharply-ridged face puckered. "Rolly, you have a highly selective education, administered by us. But is it worth while? Science-progress is a maze, a labyrinth. And when you reach the end of the quest, the Minotaur always waits."

Fran's voice interrupted seriously, black eyes shining. "We've given you most of the necessary information, but have omitted details. This the end of the Era of World Brain. It must be the end. It's a ten-acre expanse of electronic brain which is the unescapable dictator of Worldcity. Absolute mechanical dictator. And there are a thousand plastico-mechanical creations which act positronically under World Brain to carry out its functions."

Berti looked sharply at him. "Roland! Doesn't that seem terribly unjust to you. Monstrously inhuman?"

"If it's mechanical, obviously it's inhuman," said Roland.

Berti said, "Human? Organic? What is life? Only chemistry and that's all any machine is. No, by human I mean one's emotional, thalamic reactions. Do you react negatively to a dictatorial machine that destroys all human characteristics?"

"I'll even hate it," said Roland. He looked at Frances. "If you do."

SHE smiled very pleasantly at him and he asked, "But why did humans create this mechanical dictator?"

"We didn't feed your brain much history. A waste of time," she said. "Anyway, World Brain was a reaction to—to the Atomic War. That almost finished Earth life. And remaining humanity decided it couldn't afford another. Human governmental agency is too unreliable. Even human dictatorship was, of course, variable. So all the greatest scientific minds pooled their brain cells and created World Brain. Now, human culture is fixed and static. For a human, that's death. Nothing can change unless World Brain changes, and that's impossible."

"Well," said Roland. "Isn't that what was wanted?"

"It didn't work out, Rolly. A billion people turned into stagnant automatons. When organisms stop moving and changing, they're better off completely dead. Don't you agree, Rolly?"

"Yes," said Roland. "So why not destroy World Brain?"

"We're going to," interrupted Berti. "And it's got to be done right now. Civilization — I use that word liberally — has simply stopped. And as long as the entire working culture is mechanically fixed, it's absolutely hopeless." Berti's narrow shoul-

ders drooped. "Not that everything isn't, in its cosmic sense. But even the cosmos doesn't make sense, does it, Fran?"

She shook her head at him. "He doesn't believe in anything. But we don't care, do we?"

"No," said Roland. He wanted her to keep on talking to him, personally.

"We want to get rid of World Brain," said Berti. "But there are difficulties. There are the Conditioners; they're directly tied in with World Brain. From birth, everyone is conditioned to unquestionable, unbreakable bondage to World Brain. These matrixed minds can't be altered. We've tried. The only alternative is to throw a lot of great big heavy air atoms and molecules among World Brain's overheated electrons. But there are always difficulties."

Roland was mad because Berti was talking instead of Frances. He kept looking steadily at her. He asked, "Then how have we three escaped these Conditioners?" She answered this time, and Roland soaked up her sweet musical voice sensually.

"We're members of a secret Underground organization that began when World Brain began, to escape its static death system. Having gone underground, we escaped the original conditioning and have since lived completely free of the Brain's dictates. But even though unconditioned, we've been helpless against the rigid system."

"Then how can you expect to destroy World Brain now?" asked Roland. "There must be a great deal I don't know."

"Possible also that you know too much," said Berti irritably. "But then who doesn't?"

Fran laughed freely. Then her voice became suddenly grave. "We have to act now. There isn't much time. We have bogey men, too. Martians."

Roland started violently, stared. "Martians! You mean — from Mars! The planet?"

"Yeah," growled Berti. And Frances smiled. "Do you find a Martian menace credible, Rolly?"

"He should," snapped Berti. "We certainly endowed him with enough credulity. An organ that believes in its own existence will believe anything."

"I believe you," Roland said. He was looking at Frances. "And the Martians?"

Frances said, "You see, the Martians are trying to preserve World Brain. And, to do that, they've been trying for a long time to destroy the Underground."

"Why?" asked Roland. Roland was hating Berti because he talked so much.

"That should be obvious. The Martians know that, if we cancel World Brain, we'll have a variable, anarchistic government again. And, naturally, that means the return of the Atomic War threat. And, along with atomic power and subsequent space flight, that also means, according to the Martian's logic, that we'll wage an atomic war against them. And that," concluded Berti, "is good logic."

"All right," said Roland. "The Martians are fighting you so you've got to hurry and get World Brain before the Martians finish the Underground. Right?"

"Right, Rolly," beamed Frances.

"How can you accomplish that now, if you couldn't before?"

Frances came very close. Roland smelled the intoxicating aroma of a very effeminate, very suggestive, scent. She bounced up beside him on the table. He was afraid to look at her for a moment. Afraid she would go away. "You see, Rolly, you're the agent. You're going to destroy World Brain."

ROLAND tried to clarify scattered thoughts. Here in a hidden cell, he seemed so far from any reality. Alone with two people who seemed so strange—so apart from hopeless, defeated humanity. He was suddenly aware of feeling cold. Cold, yet the room was warm. Something was lacking between these two members of the Underground and himself, something vitally important. There was an isolated sensation. He noticed the utter silence. A dead, despairing silence. Abruptly he wanted to be a part of movement and noise, He wanted to get out of this small buried cube somewhere on Earth. And, if it wasn't for Frances, he would have gotten out. Right then. But he didn't.

She held him there. A human, conditioned scientifically, could only react as he was reacting now. He felt no irritation. That was the way the human organism functioned. He wanted to do it for Frances. He loved her, of course—that was it. He had known that when he first heard

her voice, before he had opened his eyes.

He heard himself saying, "When, where and how do I start?"

"Bravo!" said Berti sardonically. "A man of virtue!"

Only an objective realization of the need for unity prevailed Roland from attacking the man. He was jealous, too, and he was ashamed of that. Somehow, these people had taken him from the Birth Center when he was born, and had kept him hidden and had taught him to be a true, pre-World Brain human. He should be grateful, very grateful. And he determined to be.

Berti was crossing the room toward a panel. "Well, Prometheus, we start right now, right here. And here's how—"

He tensed, eyes narrowing.

The form was only a faint mist at first. Roland hardly knew it was materializing until he saw its wavering, translucent shadow in the middle of the room. A flash of panic and fear jerked him to his feet and sent him backing toward the further wall. He saw Frances and Berti standing stiffly, perspiration oozing visibly from their bronzed skin.

Roland had never seen anything so grotesque and alien before. At least he couldn't remember having seen — but then, he couldn't remember.

"Roland!" he heard Berti say tensely. "You're now being treated to the personal appearance of a Martian menace. Take a good look, because it just might be that you won't see another." Berti moved with shocking agility, a blur in the corner of Roland's fixed eyes. He dropped the cap over the fluorobulb. The room was plunged into pitch blackness.

Roland saw a high, narrow column of shimmering phosphorescence dart about the room. He couldn't tell whether the thing was attacking or in flight. Something about its alien contortions suggested panic.

But then he felt a hand grasping at his. It gripped hard and pulled. The voice was a hurried whisper, either that of Berti or Frances. It had to be Frances. "Follow me! Keep running!"

HE followed blindly. The hand was soft and small. Berti? Frances? Frances had to be with him. That was the only thing that really mattered. They plunged through the thick blackness and onto a levitation platform and down. They paused once, briefly. Roland heard a panel opening. Then they were in a room, smaller even than the first one. A slight glow bathed the room in a soft blue haze. It was light enough for him to see that Frances wasn't with them.

He grabbed Berti's arm, noting how frail and weak he was. "Where is she? *Where is she?*"

But Berti seemed more interested than concerned. "Do you really feel that way about her?"

"Where is she?" He said it louder this time. He shook Berti harshly.

Berti smiled thinly. "The Martian menace got her. They were bound to get her sooner or late. They've gotten us all, one by one."

Roland backed the thin bony outline up against the glowing wall. "Why did we go off and leave her there? Why?"

"To save you. You're more important than any one or all of us. She wanted it this way."

"No!" yelled Roland. "What's more important than Francis? Nothing is—to me."

"Are you sure?" asked Berti. "Remember her faith in you, Prometheus. The destruction of World Brain's more important. Relax."

Roland stepped away, breathing painfully. "No. You haven't told me yet. Why am I so important? *What am I, Berti?*"

"What are—!" Berti's eyes shot wide open, narrowed quickly. "The scientists even prepared for the eventuality that some organism might defy the conditioning processes and try to attack World Brain. It's surrounded by an area of ultrasonic radiation. All around it, under the ground, in the air. No living organism can step into that field without its cellular structure dancing itself madly to death in seconds. A lot of the Underground have tried it. In the last one we—we developed, we'd built up resistance that let him into the field about a hundred meters. That was all. But we've learned. You can make it."

"What makes you so sure?"

"We're not," said Berti laconically. "You might die. Afraid? Frances didn't think you would be. I don't know. We did our best with you."

"I'm not afraid, Berti. But I'm going back after Frances first!"

"You're our only hope, man! Don't hand yourself to those dissectors."

"Dissectors?" choked Roland.

"They analyze us. They're curious; they think humans a low form of mammal because of their insane record of self-destruction. The Martians work out of their observatories and laboratories on the Moon. They want to learn all they can about humans in case they have to destroy humanity."

"Why don't we destroy them? Now." Roland's voice trembled.

"The Underground is the only Earth agency that knows the Martians even exist. And we can't act against them anyway until World Brain is destroyed. Atomic energy is locked behind impenetrable shields as long as World Brain rules. Violence or conflict of any kind is forbidden by the fixed laws of World Brain. The Martians are persistent. Only a few of us left. They know if they can wipe out the Underground, World Brain will keep on its fixed orbit, and then they won't have to destroy Earth because humanity won't be able to use atomic power against them, and eventually humanity will peter out."

"Why don't the Martians destroy Earth, Underground and all, if they're so afraid of World Brain being destroyed and atomic power returning as a threat?"

"Because," said Berti dryly, "their planet's old and exhausted. They want to colonize Earth. But not while the Underground's here."

"I don't care about any of this confusion," yelled Roland. "All I care about is saving Francis. Maybe it isn't right according to the way you've conditioned me. But I've got to!"

He thought he saw a thin smile on Berti's dour face as he turned and ran back down the black corridor. About the instant that he realized he had no conception of how to get back to the first cubicle, he ran hard into a pair of arms and a thick reeling cloud of that intoxicating scent—

A wave of weakening relief and gladness almost overpowered him as he touched her. "You—it is you, Fran. You're all right?"

"Yes. Yes." Her breath came fast, impatient. "We've got to hurry, Rolly. I got rid of that one. But the new rapport-clan know about you, maybe. We don't have much time. Come on!"

The levitator shaft panel slid shut behind them. The car whined, and Roland felt the sudden suffocating pressure of rapid acceleration.

THEY emerged in the darkened, damp basement of a vacant ruin just outside Worldcity. He saw a pallid, three-eyed lizard, and a huge grey rat with six legs. He followed Berti and Frances into a beautiful lazy summer day, with genuine sunlight. A hawk sailed easily across a pale blue sky. In the distance, rising like a gigantic bubble, the plastic dome shell that covered Worldcity gleamed in the sun.

They walked silently on down the cracked, weed-grown concrete highway.

Berti started talking again. Roland wanted Frances to talk, but she seemed too absorbed in the scenery. "Special excursion monorail systems were set up for trips into the natural areas. Psychological balance, you know. But it was too late. No one cares any more. An almost completely katatonic world is a pretty terrible sight, I suppose. World Brain blocked any action of free thought—the one spontaneous, progressive and unique characteristic of the human."

That broke Frances' reverie. "Yes, Rolly. Block that characteristic and you kill the human. The human is a step above the beast because of his free associative brain. But it also persists in dooming him as a species. The human heart and muscle belong to the jungle—his overdeveloped brain to an environment of his own creation."

She was swinging freely along beside him. Berti said, "Civilization subjected the human body to a vast and critical experiment. But the exaggeration of a part, like the fossil nautili, intended the experiment to fail."

"But man isn't licked yet!" said Roland vehemently. "He's got his highly specialized brain, and complexity and specialization aren't necessarily fatal—simply dangerous."

"You're proud of him," said Berti, cutting off the tops of weeds with quick slicing motions of a green branch. "Even with his brain, he was never much better than the beast. A living anachronism, an unbalanced grotesque, an ape top-heavy with grey matter."

"Quiet!" hissed Frances. Then to Roland. "He isn't that way, really."

The sophistry lapsed. Roland was grateful because it allowed him to concentrate on watching the smooth, graceful movement of Frances' lithe body. There was an almost terrible casualness for people going to save the World.

"Aren't you afraid of the Martians—out here in the open?" he asked.

Berti's green switch sang. A four-legged quail fluttered up and hedge-hopped across a wild, brush-choked hollow, piping excitedly. "We know them. They're—ah" he hesitated "—a kind of instinctual intelligence, somewhere above the survival value of the human intelligence. We've learned to cope with them on their own ground."

"But how?" Roland was curious about how Frances had "gotten rid" of the Martian back in the cubicle. He was swinging his hand close to hers in the fond hope of grasping it sooner or later.

Frances kicked at a small piece of dislodged concrete. "Rolly, you're so inquisitive. That would be awfully hard to explain in the short time we have. They've advanced far above human's mere intelligence. And you learn to deal with that height. Or they get you. They've always had superiority of numbers, so they've been winning. That's why we've got to destroy World Brain quickly before they finish us."

"But, if World Brain is destroyed, and variable unpredictable government returns with human control, atomic energy returns with it, and humanity will try again. And probably destroy itself this time." Roland hit his forehead with his flat hand. "It seems very involved."

"Doesn't it?" agreed Berti tightly. "But we'll control atomic energy all right. If we can't—let the termites have it."

Roland thought of one other thing. "After World Brain's out of commission, what about the Martians, then? First thing they'll do will be to blow up Earth, regardless of their own desire to colonize."

Berti looked narrowly at Frances. He grinned thinly. "I told you we should have taken less time with his logic and reason. He thinks too much."

Frances laughed carelessly. "He'll have to be smart when he goes into the heart of World Brain. You know that."

Berti said, "Uh-huh. But if he's smart enough, he wouldn't even go into World Brain at all."

Frances smiled at Roland. "Well? Are you that smart?"

He looked into wet, promising glowing eyes and he didn't feel logical at all. "If you want me to, Fran, I'll do it. It seems to mean a lot to you. So I guess I'm not really smart—not in the Berti sense, anyway. Am I?"

Berti swirled the green switch in a vicious slash. "Not as smart as Fran is."

LATER, in a secret Underground apartment, Roland sat waiting for his final orders to destroy World Brain. He was proud of his assignment. He knew it was justified. He had seen the people of Worldcity.

Terrible standardization. Mass production and mass consumption had become possible only because of complete unity of common desires and tastes. Individuals were no more. Beneath the rigid unchange of World Brain there had been a final leveling-off. The whole system was mechanical like its electronic dictator. Frightened by another possible atomic war under unreliable human agency, they had established fool-proof laws, then subjected themselves and the laws to a machine dictator that could never alter them. Suicide.

The Worldcity was beautiful and magnificent, even without the available atomic power. Towering synthetic buildings, their block-square bases pierced by wide tiered boulevards. There were many people packing the boulevards. Dull-eyed, listless, uninterested. Without their free-associative minds, they were not even beasts.

"It's about time," said Frances softly, leaning toward him. "Are you ready? It's a big job."

Roland sat next to her on a deep couch, her shoulder touching his. He wanted the contact to remain as long as possible. She broke the contact several times, but renewed it. He was grateful. She had called him "dear" twice.

"I've already told him he might not come back," said Berti. "It's dangerous. The Martians' new rapport-clan are difficult. And the destruction when World Brain stops will be terrific. The Martians will immediately jump in and try to knock

out Earth as soon as they see World Brain go. If they don't get you first. As soon as we take over the atomic laboratories, our first job will be to blow up the Martian's Moon bases. It's a risky business."

"You'll be safe," Frances said. "You're not afraid, are you, Rolly?'

"Not too much," answered Roland.

"You have three dangers. The Martians. The plastico-mechanical men. And the ultrasonic field. The last you're prepared for. The Martians might get you. The plastic men...you might have trouble with them."

"They're one-track, highly specialized," said Berti, studying Roland with a quizzical, unwavering stare. "Anything that blocks their specialized assignments they'll push aside. They have no conception of violence as such. It's just a means to carry through their fixed patterns of behavior."

"If you're waiting for my decision," said Roland, "you know it. I couldn't be any different. I'm human. Humanity means more to me than my own life."

He looked at Frances closely, searching for some deep, full reaction to his bravery. He got a warm soft smile and damp eyes that shone darkly. He leaned a little against her shoulder as he got to his feet. He walked to the exit panel and turned slowly.

"I can recall conditioned directions now pretty well. Any last briefings?"

Frances shook her head, and a healthy cloud of black hair reflected the steady glow of the flueros. "You know about the electronic set up. The originators didn't bother to shield the vital parts of World Brain on the logical premise that if anyone could get that far, it was inevitable, only a matter of time, before they could wreck it anyway. Wreck the grids, Rolly, the pipes of the electrons. Wreck the big vacuum brains in which our little wild electrons play. They've been free too long. Imprison them again in the air. It's exciting, isn't it, Rolly?"

His eyes, his brain were filled only with her image, her vivid loveliness. He hesitated, thinking Frances might get up and come to him. She only smiled, her eyes wet and glistening with pride. Roland turned and left the room. There was promise in those eyes. And he would be back.

He was walking toward the levitation shaft at the end of the corridor when he met the Martian in the hall.

SOMEHOW, he had an idea that unless it wanted it that way, no one could see it there. It seemed less grotesque now, standing there against the wall looking at him. He stood tautly, watching it. And suddenly he knew why it didn't seem so grotesque. Why its formless, limbless, upright length of almost translucent stuff swaying like an underwater plant seemed less a peril now. It was afraid. It was not an attacker or even a pursuer. It was frightened, and, telepathetically, in sharp bursting impressions, it pleaded with Roland. *No! Oh, no! You do not understand. Wait! Wait and you can know of the countless facets of re—*

Something like pain shot through his skull. The Martian trembled, vibrated, and then—disappeared. Roland spun around. Frances stood there. She was smiling, but there had been another expression. He couldn't—

She was close to him now. He felt her animal warmth. "We sensed it out here," she said softly, "and came to your rescue, Rolly. He was a weaker one, and we got him. We must work fast. Go, dear Rolly. This—this is for good luck."

He leaned against the wall. She was gone. The kiss...he had been waiting for that. None of the other things made any difference now. But now she was gone and the wall felt cold. He wanted warmth. He wanted Fran's warmth. He wanted it more than anything. He—

— he was out on an autowalk among the shifting listless crowd. He moved toward the five-acre expanse of World Brain. He was aware of nothing about him, only of Frances. He would soon be back with her. Destroying World Brain was only a means to that end. He noticed then, abruptly, that the people around him had only five fingers on their hands. But he didn't think about it. It had no meaning anyway.

Then, suddenly, he was aware that there were no more people. No more buildings, either. A cool wind blew across his hot face. He stood awed on the long, sweeping rim of an abyss, the edge of a bowl. Its sides curved down and away in gracious gleaming sweeps, down, down and away into a colossal valley. In its center was World Brain. A gigantic, unbroken cylinder, a mile away and a thousand meters down.

He knew he was on the periphery of the ultrasonic field now. He walked along the railed edge of the abyss until he faced the plastic man who was standing before the opening of a levitation shaft that would take him directly into the arteries of World Brain.

He tried to edge past the plastic man. There wasn't room enough; the plastic man wasn't designed to make any room. The creation was very close to a perfect synthesis. There was no other way. Roland charged head down into the waiting figure and hurled him upward over the railing.

Roland watched him spin out end over end, then flatten out on the sweeping curvature and go sliding with fantastic silent slowness, away and down, down the long, seemingly endless curve into the depths of the gigantic plastic bowl. Roland stepped into the shaft. Dwarfed, Roland walked slowly across the gleaming expanse of floor toward the nakedly exposed rows of electronic brain cases. A few blows, a pull or two, and the circuit would be shattered. His sandals rustled softly.

But he hesitated.

There was a guilty feeling and a lost loneliness. Who was he, really? Taken in infancy from some birth center by the Underground. Conditioned precisely as they desired — a completely selective mentality. Had never had a name. But a label someone pulled out of a hat to satisfy a beautiful woman's peculiar liking for nicknames. The amnesiac's isolated fear of what he didn't know and couldn't remember, mustn't remember, but what he must know—

But Frances waited for him back in the secret apartment. Warmth would replace a cold emptiness. Meaning and purpose would fill the lonely places in his heart.

He went forward—

LATER, Roland paused outside their apartment door. He had come back. Frances had brought him back. World Brain was finished. He knew that. He could remember the subtle changes beginning to occur even as he came back through Worldcity. Soon the whole intricate structure would collapse.

The hall was still. He looked at the back of his hand against the wall. It shook a little. And the coldness came back. It crept into his muscles from his extremities, his hands and feet, and worked inward. He wondered why the loneliness should return here. There was a steady comfort, though, in know that behind that panel, Frances was waiting with her gigglings and her soft shoulders and promising eyes.

The photoelectric banks opened the panel and closed it behind him.

They were standing there together, looking at him. He stumbled back against the flat panel, resting his back against it. Something had happened to them. They made him feel alien and afraid. They—

And then Berti said, "Odd. It has come back. What went wrong with our charts, I wonder?"

Her voice wasn't emotional now. It had never been, he knew that. Her giggling. The smile, the wet eyes. False. "Our calculations couldn't have been off very much. It'll die soon."

Roland edged toward her. "Frances," he said weakly. "Francis, you said—*'it'*. You mean me? Fran. *Fran?*"

Berti said, "Our conditioning was most effective. Fran, it actually *loves* you. Remarkable."

She didn't smile now. She couldn't. There was no feeling at all, never had been. All false. Nothing now but cold awareness of power.

He felt weak and dizzy. A hazy outline moved toward him. Berti. "I still regret seeing you die. You're interesting. A peculiarly interesting experiment. If I had time —almost fifty years of trial and error to create you, Rolly."

"A good job, too," said the woman. "Though we did take an awful chance, making it so rational. It might have solved the enigma of its own existence."

Berti shook his bald head. "We had to make it human so it would be sympathetic. Emotional. No human was ever able to solve the enigma of himself. We can't either, Fran. Or can we?"

From a far hazy distance, he saw Berti's head turn back, his pouting lip thrust out, his shiny head reflecting the cold light.

"And you never suspected at all that you were a robot, Rolly? Just a lot of electrons and polarizable cells, eh? Remarkable. But then, the last thing a robot would ever realize would be that it was a robot, I suppose."

Roland shut his eyes. He was tired. He wanted to sleep. He wanted to forget about the imaginative creature he had known for a time as Frances, too.

"We gave you a heavy overload of romanticism and sentimentalism. So you would be glad to die for Frances, for humanity. But you needed logic with it, and that was a very delicate balance to establish. All that work to construct a machine that was to function only a few hours. And your allotted time is about up, Rolly.

"We misled you by omission only, Rolly. Our purpose wasn't humanity. We needed you to destroy World Brain, not for humanity. But for us. World Brain restricted our development, kept us from defeating the Martians by shielding atomic power. Rolly, the Underground was a race of mutants that developed after the Atomic War. Humanity never knew about us. Homo-superior. We've developed the same degree above mere human intelligence that the Martians have. We're their equals; that's why we could fight them. They outnumbered us, though, that's why we had to have your help. You have all the human attributes, Rolly. You want to know what qualities the next step above human is, don't you?"

ROLAND scarcely heard the man. He was cold. He was tired.

"We've developed the physiological relation between the nervous system and the consciousness. Instinctualism, a high degree of predictability — but then your human brain wouldn't understand."

Roland sank to his knees. He dropped his head in his folded arms.

"Let's go," said the woman. "Leave it here. It'll die soon."

"Just a minute, Fran. Don't you find this interesting? This creation of grids, filaments, plates, vacuums, is probably the last genuine human type we'll see—that's sane. And we made it!"

She sighed resignedly. "It probably wants to know what the fate of its beloved humanity is. We gave it that social consciousness. Tell it."

"Of course it's concerned, but Rolly's dying now, and the important thing to it is that it's dying for humanity." Berti paused. "And the horrible thing for Rolly, is to know that humanity really died from over-specialization when it launched the final Atomic War."

Roland's head raised slowly and shook back and forth. "No."

Berti smiled. "Human intelligence never had the slightest possibility of survival. Its high cerebral specialization never had any physiological unity with the primitive muscles and nervous system. A slight chemical disturbance of the blood and the human went mad. Take away a little oxygen—his great mind was gone. Decrease the blood's calcium — convulsions, coma, death. Slight reduction in sugar—and his mighty cerebrum blotted out, died. A slight environmental change could destroy man—aside from his obvious willingness to destroy himself. But, Rolly, in one way, perhaps, extinction, the price of evolution, isn't too high. After all, you made us possible."

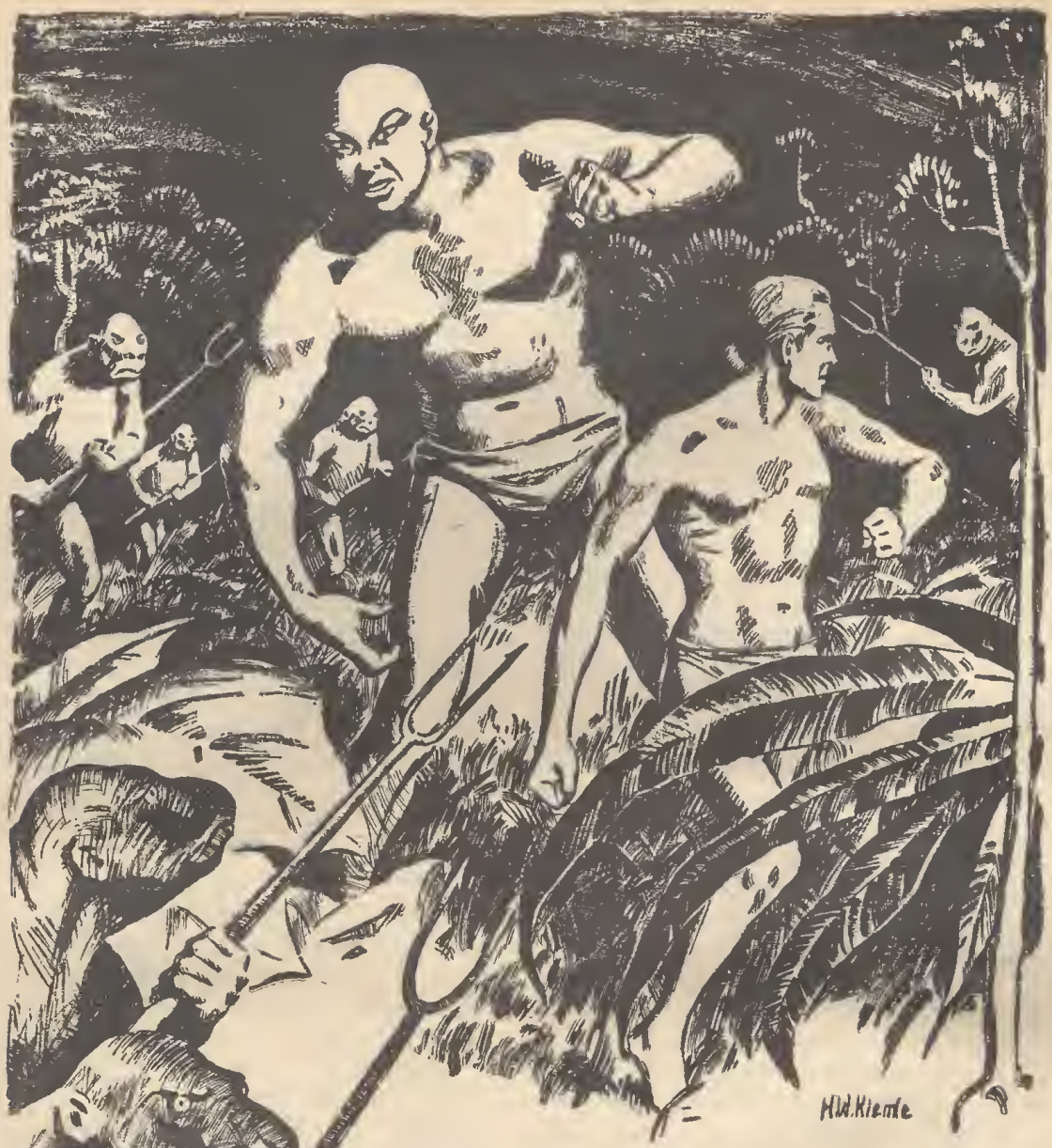
Roland heard himself say, weakly, "But they still live out there—humans—surely they're not—"

"But we rule," said the woman coldly. "They—what will they do? That will be interesting. Anyway, it's their twilight, like apes and saurians. Our dawning."

"You're almost gone, Rolly, dwindling away like a stream," said Berti. "World Brain was proof against any *organic* enemy, including us. But not against you. A matter of kind against kind. Remember De Morgan's familiar lines? But then you wouldn't, would you? 'Great fleas have little fleas upon their backs to bite 'em; and little fleas have lesser fleas, and so on, ad infinitum; and the great fleas themselves in turn have greater fleas to grow on, while these again have greater still, and greater still, and so on.' We used you, Rolly. A machine to bite a machine. That was the only way it could have been done."

Very far away, dim and wavering, Roland heard the woman saying, "Logically, any species has some overly-specialized characteristic that might defeat it. I wonder what particular little flea will bite us?"

"And that, too, will be interesting," thought Roland grimly, as his electronic brain thinned into meaningless chaos, and he returned into the hazes of unconsciousness from which he had emerged three hours before.



When they awoke the Chameleon men were there.

TEST FOR THE PEARL

By VASELEOS GARSON

Together, the Earthman and the Jovian outfought and outwitted the prison guards, the Venusian jungle-hell, the cunning Chameleon men. Together, they were invincible. But at the Test for the Pearl they divided . . .

FAR OFF IN THE STEAMING Venusian jungle, a band of the Chameleon men halted, lifting their mottled faces in the direction of the sound. Closer in, a four-man jungle patrol of Earthmen broke as one man into a run along the trail, their swift-moving bodies swishing the clouds into ragged streamers.

At the edge of the viscous river circling the island an armed guard slipped on his infra-red glasses and began searching his area carefully, his special light traveling slowly along the river and its near and opposite banks.

On the island, only a few yards from the high, thick walls of the Interplanetary Prison, a patch of ground, approximately eight feet by five quivered once—and was still.

The deep-throated roar of the escape siren was thunderous. It carried for scores of miles through the steamy atmosphere of the planet, alerting both natives and Earthman patrols to a successful break from that most fabulous of prisons—The Hole.

Behind the oxygen mask he wore, lying under a foot of the thick spongy soil of the planet, Jarl Gare wiggled his itching body and chuckled.

He nudged Waltk, the huge Jovian who lay beside him. "Don't get restless, now," he mumbled through the mask. "We have hours to wait. And somebody might spot this patch of ground if you keep wriggling."

The Jovian grunted, wriggled again, and then was quiet.

"Men have escaped from The Hole before," Jarl Gare muttered, "but they were always caught before they got to the pearl beds. Waltk's body and my brain will get us through."

He envisioned one of the huge Venusian pearls—so rare and so precious on Earth that it could buy a man's freedom, even from a murder charge.

Jarl Gare fell asleep, dreaming of a bauble as big as his head.

HE was awakened by a nudge. "It is night," Waltk grunted. "I smell it."

Gare worked one hand up through the spongy earth, poked a hole in it and wiped the mud from his mask's eye-piece.

"Right," he muttered. "It's time to go." He worked his head out of the ground and looked about.

There could be infra-red spotlights covering the very ground under which they lay. But they would have to take the chance.

His body made a sucking sound as he drew himself from the self-dug grave. He reached back in and tapped Waltk. The big Jovian virtually erupted from the ground, the weight nothing to his mighty thews.

Carefully they replaced the spongy earth. Then, with Jarl Gare in the lead, the pair walked upright, but quietly, to the great power-charged fence.

It went up twenty feet and down the same distance underground—Jarl Gare had learned this depth from a prisoner who had tried to dig his way out but failed and nearly drowned as liquid seeped into the hole he was digging.

The big Jovian, his thick-thewed body glimmering with sweat in the ground light, bent to pick up Jarl Gare's slight naked body.

"Wait," Jarl Gare warned. "We must wait until one of the river beasts start plunging."

The Jovian grunted. He waited, flexing the great shoulder and back muscles. Then he said suddenly, "I smell guards."

Jarl Gare's thin face jerked up at the seven foot figure of his companion. "Where?" he asked tensely.

The Jovian with a quick movement shoved Jarl Gare to the ground, dropped flat swiftly himself and wriggled away through the short grass.

Jarl Gare waited quietly. The big Jovian whose eyes, trained on his homeworld of darkness, penetrated the steamy fog of Venus almost as well as an infra-red lamp, would take care of the guards his nostrils had scented.

That was the way Jarl Gare had planned it. Waltk's strength, nearly a dozen times greater than that of an Earthling, his hearing developed to a tremendous acuity by the environment of his homeworld, and his eyesight were the tools of Jarl's brain.

If Waltk had had Jarl's brain, he could have won a Venusian pearl, but, while Nature had given him a marvelous machine for survival, she had only given him just enough brain to keep it operating.

His work would be done when they reached the Venusian pearl beds. One glance at the bulky figure and the Venusians would know the weakness. But it did not matter if he lost. Jarl Gare would still win a pearl.

I have no weakness, Jarl grinned to himself, *except pride and the Venusians seek out physical or mental weakness—not a character weakness.* He remembered the oft-told tale of the Earthman whom the

Venusians had frightened to death, but that was beacuse he showed that fear physically.

Three years in The Hole and you either go raving mad or learn to mask every emotion.

Abruptly, Waltk was back. "There were two," he said, "Two no more."

"Did they have fog-piercers?" Jarl Gare asked.

"Yes," Waltk grunted. "I remembered what you said." He handed over a pair of glasses and the special light. "You would not need these. I see enough for both of us."

There was a muted splash from the river.

Waltk's great hands seized Jarl Gare about the waist and lifted him. "Three splashes—then heave," Jarl Gare said.

The next splash was louder, the second louder and longer and, when the third crashed into the night, Jarl Gare was flung as if from a catapult over the fence.

As his naked body struck the river, his mind exulted. It was perfect timing, the splash of the river beast drowning out his own.

Jarl Gare trod water, waiting. The Jovian's hurtling figure was a dark blotch against the fog. Jarl swallowed a deep breath of air before the splash of water from the Jovian's body struck him.

THE TWO of them floated quietly, let the river water grow sluggish again. The splashing of the beasts grew nearer. Jarl Gare heard the big Jovian breathing hoarsely. He said reassuringly, "They are harmless, Waltk. I've told you so a dozen times."

"I have never seen one of them," Waltk said hoarsely. "I fear nothing I have seen. You have only told me of them."

Only a few feet away, one of the river beasts suddenly lunged out of the water. Waltk squealed as the huge body loomed in the air over them, then landed between them, sending spray cascading over them.

Waltk struck out at the beast and then began to chuckle. Jarl Gare heard the chuckle through the echoes of the splash.

The beast was gone. "Look," said Waltk, holding up one hand. It held a blob of dripping flesh. "It is weak. I have seen it and I am unafraid."

For answer, Jarl Gare who had just donned the infra-red glasses, tapped Waltk on the shoulder and plunged under the water. He had sighted the ray of an infra-red light on the river.

Jarl Gare swam under water, moving with the current. He felt the movement of the water behind him and knew Waltk was following.

He angled for the far bank. On arrival he slid his head and eyes out carefully. The infra-red light was far up the river, following the jumping river beasts.

Without ripple or sound, Waltk broke the surface of the river.

Their two naked bodies glistening with the water, Jarl Gare and Waltk stepped out of the river and slid into the luxurious growth of the jungle.

One step in the climb to freedom and wealth had been accomplished! Jarl Gare chuckled, patting the mighty arms of his companion.

"Can you lead us in a straight line through the jungle if I give you a pointer?" Jarl Gare asked. He knew the answer—but he liked to preen his ego on the knowledge that his brain had evolved the plan. Waltk grunted.

"Look back at the Hole," Jarl Gare said.

The Jovian turned, his eyes intent. "I see it," he said.

"The high radio tower?" The Jovian grunted. "The guard's barracks?" Again the Jovian grunted.

"Draw an imaginary line from the tower through the center of the barracks. Our path will extend along that line."

"Come," said Waltk. He led Jarl Gare back up the river, watching the tower. He halted finally, facing across the river, and then made an abrupt about-face.

He closed his eyes and stood tense, unmoving as minutes dripped past.

"I have it," he said.

Brains, chuckled Jarl Gare to himself. *Use every weapon, every tool. But it was easy. Waltk was of a race which had developed for self-preservation the sense of taking a straight line between two points. In their vast world where landmarks were absent, it was a necessity.*

Here on Venus that sense would lead Jarl Gare to freedom and wealth.

It was like a radio beam on the space lanes, but the Jovian needed no sending

station. He was the station itself, able to orient himself if he went off course.

They started out through the jungle—naked and unarmed—aiming straight for the Venusian pearl-beds which, by Jarl Gare's estimate, lay three hundred miles north of the Hole. Three hundred miles between hell and heaven.

WALTK was tireless, his great body immune to the ravages of the sharp-edged undergrowth and the strangling vines. He had no need of a path. He made his own, guided by that unfailing sense of direction.

Jarl Gare slid along in the Jovian's wake, his passage cleared by the strength of his companion.

Jarl used his infra-red lamp sparingly, for fear Earth patrols might be wearing the special glasses and discover the beam.

The patrols were tough and relentless. They shot first and then asked questions.

Jarl used the lamp to reassure himself, even though Waltk grunted when anything out of the ordinary appeared, describing it to his companion.

Their first sleep came when Jarl Gare judged they had come almost a third of the distance to the pearl beds. He suppressed the hunger pains in his belly by telling Waltk again the story of the Venusian pearls. They lay in a cradle of a great tree whose five great arms spread out from the trunk.

"I saw one once, Waltk," Jarl Gare said, and his voice was soft. "It was back on Earth, and it was the property of one of the richest men on Earth—Voltane, inventor of the force field that protects space cruisers from asteroids and space fragments. He gave half his wealth for it. And he was rated as worth four million credits."

"Two million credits for a jewel? He was a fool," Waltk said.

"Ah, but, Waltk, you should have seen it. He displayed it once a month in public. And the crowds that gathered . . . It was gray, but it pulsed and throbbed as it were alive."

Waltk said seriously, "I did not know the pearls were gray. I had heard they were pink or red or orange. I never heard of a gray one."

"Nor had I," Jarl Gare nodded. "But there it was. It wasn't the color that attracted me, but the life force that seemed to throb within it.

"That day I decided I would have one—though I knew there were only four of them on Earth. But there was no way for me to get to Venus—"

"I know," said Waltk, "You have told me. You were Earthbound because you had been in Earth police custody too often. But you made a plan. Earthmen convicted of treason, murder and other high crimes were sent to The Hole. So you killed a man—

"And was sent to the Hole. But for you, Waltk, my plan would have failed. I needed your strength—your instinct—your eyes. I promised you a pearl, too."

"You have already given it to me," Waltk said quietly. "Freedom from The Hole, if only for a while. Because you led me from the Hole, I will help you until your quest is ended. I swear it."

Jarl Gare chuckled to himself. *The simple-minded brute! He thinks he's free. For the moment, sure, but when he meets the Venusians he's done. Good riddance. A tool should be discarded if there's no more use for it.*

THE gentle touch of Waltk's big hand on his shoulder awakened him. "The Chameleon men," Waltk whispered.

Hastily, Jarl Gare slipped on the glasses and seized the light. "Where?" he asked.

"They are in a circle about the tree."

Jarl Gare swerved the light around the tree. A hundred yards away was the edge of the circle. The infra-red showed them—dark, hunched figures.

"They just seem to be waiting for something," Jarl Gare said.

"Us," Waltk said laconically.

Jarl Gare went through the card-catalog of his brain. The Chameleon men, the Venusian natives, evolved from reptiles who walked upright, were intelligent but could converse with men only through thought pictures. They were the guardians of the pearl-beds.

Their vision in their fog world was as good if not better than Waltk's. They needed no infra-red rays to penetrate the fog as the Earthmen did.

They had fought viciously against colonization by Earthmen. Despite punitive measures by Earth, they were not con-

quered and finally there had been an Earth-Venus treaty.

Earthmen were permitted access to the oil fields and were allowed to create The Hole. In token of the great pact, the Earth had given its largest, most perfect diamond to Venus. Venus, ruled by its hierarchy of the Guardian Priests, had given a pearl.

The pearl had touched off cupidity on Earth—and adventurers by the score had attempted to wrest others.

Earth at first had sought to halt the adventurers, but Venus had replied cryptically. "Let them come. If they can obtain a pearl, they have won it fairly."

Of the hundreds who had tried, only three had won through successfully. Only three had been strong enough to pass the test of weakness.

If an Earthman made it to the pearl-beds, he was given the test of weakness. If he passed it, he went free with a pearl of his choice. If he lost, he disappeared.

Only three . . . and Jarl Gare chuckled. Soon there would be four. Jarl Gare.

The Venusians were sluggish moving and web-footed, perfectly at home on their spongy earth. But in the trees?

Jarl Gare spoke quietly to Waltk. "We can escape them by traveling through the trees."

"I could," said Waltk, "but you would be too slow. They would capture you."

Jarl Gare looked at Waltk appraisingly. "On your back, I would not slow you too much."

Waltk grinned widely, his moon face wrinkling. He laughed throatily. "You would not slow me at all. I had not thought of that."

Jarl Gare's ray gun swept the circle again. "I wish I could see them," he said. "I'd like to know what they looked like if I met them face to face."

Waltk's eyes turned to one of the waiting figures. "They are as tall as you. Their heads are conical, set on sloping shoulders without much neck. Their bodies are mottled green and red and brown. They carry two-pronged spears. Their feet are webbed."

"I have seen pictures of them," Jarl Gare said. "But they weren't colored. I remember reading that they can change the colors of their skin to blend with surroundings."

"They blend well," Waltk said. "It was difficult for me to see them at first after I had sensed them."

Waltk slung Jarl Gare on his back. A tensing of his mighty thews and one leap took them to a tree thirty feet away. Then they were swinging swiftly through the upper reaches of the forest, propelled by the Jovian's strength, made even more powerful by the lesser gravitational pull of Venus.

A mile away Waltk halted, while Jarl Gare swept the forest behind him with the infra-red ray. He laughed. "They're still sitting there, waiting for us."

"Good," said Waltk. "It is easier to travel in the trees."

He resumed the role of carrier, and went plunging on.

THE HOURS of flight through the trees seemed hardly to touch the reserves of the Jovian's strength.

But suddenly, abruptly, he halted.

"We cannot go further through the trees," he said to a puzzled Jarl Gare.

"The end of the forest ahead?" Jarl Gare asked. "That means we're less than a hundred Earth miles from the beds."

"No," Waltk said. "Not the end of the forest. There is something I don't understand. I feel a pressure ahead of us . . . as if some horrible fate awaits us."

Jarl Gare's first reaction was to brush away Waltk's fears as if merely caused by not understanding what lay ahead. It was like Waltk's fear of the water beasts. But then he remembered the intuitive sense the Jovians had.

"We'd better go down, then," Jarl Gare decided.

"No," said Waltk. "It is the same there."

"Then we'll go around it. Come on."

An ironic smile blossomed on Waltk's moon face.

"It is the same everywhere," he said. "To either side, above, below, ahead and behind us."

Jarl Gare, whose fierce desire for a Venusian pearl had lifted him above panic, felt only a twinge of exasperation.

"I feel nothing," he said, irritated. "Why can't we keep going?"

The Jovian shrugged. "I feel we can't."

"Hell," said Jarl Gare, "I'll go down and show you."

Jarl Gare's wiry, whip-scarred body slid down the limb on which they stood until it reached the crotch of the huge tree. He started down the trunk. Waltk watched him quietly.

Jarl Gare stopped suddenly. Then, slowly, he inched his way back up the trunk to the limb where the Jovian stood.

"I see what you mean," he said. "This was something I hadn't figured on." He sat down on the limb, letting his legs dangle.

Whatever had them hemmed in wasn't intangible. It was real. His foot had touched it. It had felt cold and gave slightly. Jarl Gare brought the foot up and looked at the toes. They looked unharmed, but seemed numb.

He pinched them and felt no more sensation than if they had grown numb from loss of circulation. They were cold to his touch.

Was that force thin-skinned like a balloon or solid as a plasticine ball?

"Waltk," he said, "Break me off a good-sized branch."

The Jovian slid farther out on the limb, snapped off a branch the thickness of his wrist and about three feet long and brought it to Jarl Gare.

"Watch it closely," he ordered Waltk.

He dropped the heavy branch. It fell about twenty feet, and stopped abruptly. Then slowly, like a ruptured duralloy canoe, it started downward again, but gaining speed. It struck the ground, but neither Waltk nor Jarl Gare could hear it strike.

Then the force wasn't solid.

He became aware that the foot which had touched the force was beginning to tingle. The power it released to numb was only temporary then.

Jarl Gare chuckled. Their bodies might be numbed for a while, but they would be free of the force.

Quickly, he slid down the branch again. At approximately the same spot where he'd stopped before, he halted again and reached out tentatively with his toes, touching the numbness.

He looked back at Waltk. "Follow me," he ordered.

Then Jarl Gare jumped. It was like leaping into frigid water from a steaming shower bath. The shock wiped the consciousness from Jarl Gare, but not before he felt his body falling freely. He didn't feel the lesser shock as his body struck the spongy sward of the jungle.

AWARENESS that his face hurt came to Jarl Gare first. It was a recurring pain. First it stung, then the pain retreated. Then it stung again . . .

He realized that someone was methodically slapping his face. He opened his eyes. Waltk stopped slapping him.

The big Jovian was grinning. "It is all above us now," he said.

Jarl Gare stood up, and almost fell down again, staggering, feeling no sensation in his legs.

Waltk supported him. "It will leave. My body is tingling only pleasantly now."

Sensations came back quickly. Even Jarl's eyes began to tingle in harmony with the thousand prickles that coursed over his body.

Finally he could limp along and as the power returned to his muscles he began to step out briskly.

"What was it?" Waltk asked.

Jarl Gare shrugged. "I don't know for sure, but it must have been some sort of thin force field—able to resist concerted pressure, but not quick, sharp shocks like our leaping bodies."

The tangled jungle finally dwindled away and the pair were striding across fields rich with vegetation.

"It is beautiful," Waltk declared. "Such bright colors shining like jewels through this fog."

Jarl Gare glanced at Waltk sharply, and then at the gray vegetation. He grinned. "I wish I had your eyes, Waltk, or been raised on Jupiter where I'd have to develop such keen perception."

Waltk shrugged his big shoulders. "You Earthmen have good eyes, too, but you do not need them as much as we do."

"Are we still heading right?" Jarl Gare asked.

Waltk nodded. They plodded on.

That night they supped on a queer animal that Waltk had run down and throttled with his bare hands. It tasted like beefsteak. Waltk ate prodigiously, but Jarl Gare, who wanted to be sharp and quick on the morrow, ate sparingly.

During the night, Jarl awakened several

times, his nerves on edge for the test he knew lay ahead, but Waltk slept heavily.

When they awakened the Chameleon men were there.

Waltk was on his feet instantly, his great hands reaching out. Jarl came to his feet more slowly, wondering that the Chameleon men had not slain them while they slept.

The skins of the Chameleon men were a mottled gray, colored to match the gray background in which they lived, he observed. There were a dozen of them ranged around the big Jovian and the slight Earthman. Their barbed two-pronged spears were held lightly in their webbed hands, and their lidless eyes stared blankly at the naked pair.

Jarl Gare waited quietly, one hand on the powerful biceps of his companion.

Finally, he became aware of a picture growing in his mind. Of a vine and tree-latticed river spouting out of a jungle into a deep pool. All around the edges of the pool were stacked great piles of huge oyster shells.

The surface of the pool broke regularly, conical heads popped out and the mottled bodies swam toward shore, depositing the huge shells where they were taken by other Chameleon men, expertly split open and examined.

One out of three yielded a pulsating pearl.

Then into Jarl Gare's mind came another picture. He and Waltk leaping through the trees, then jumping through the force field, finally coming to the fields, leaving the jungle behind. Then a picture of the pearl beds again. Now a picture of strange men—wrestling with the Chameleon men, throwing great weights, leaping, diving into the pool, racing against the Chameleon men in their own element.

A great sigh lifted Jarl Gare's breast.

"Waltk," he cried. "We have passed all but the final test. One more, and the pearls are ours."

The Chameleon men nodded and turned, to march ahead of them across the fields.

Jarl Gare was exulting. "I will win a pearl—a glorious gray pearl pulsing with life and beauty. I have no weakness, Waltk. My quest is almost over."

Waltk said quietly, "You have a weakness, Jarl. Perhaps I can help you."

Jarl Gare drew his slight body taut. "I need no help now, Waltk. I used you when I needed you. I don't need you any longer. I will win out alone. With all your strength, you are weaker than I."

Waltk stared at him. "You do not like me? You have just used what I have to help yourself?"

"Yes, you big dumb ox," Jarl Gare gloated. "Your weakness is too obvious. You're strong, but the Venusians have tests for such strength, and even your mighty body will fail."

"And you have no weakness?" Waltk asked. "Suppose they give you the test of strength?"

"The Chameleon men don't do it that way. They read your mind, almost, and figure out a test that should not be impossible, if you are uniformly strong in body, mind and courage. The test is for all three, and you must have the brains to go with strength."

"I see," Waltk said, and when he looked at Jarl Gare, there was almost a sense of pity in the glance.

AT LAST they came to the pool. Out of the fog-shrouded lake came the Chameleon men, their bodies dripping, their webbed hands carrying the great shells.

The band of Chameleon men leading the Jovian and the Earthman halted. Two of them dived into the pool. After long minutes the pair reappeared, lugging between them a gigantic clam.

They set it down before Waltk. They stared at Waltk. Finally, Waltk grinned and nodded. With their metal spears, four of the Chameleon men pried open the bivalve, and held it open by standing on the shell edges.

Waltk flexed his great muscles and clamped a huge hand on each shell edge.

Jarl Gare's yellow eyes widened. Waltk's test was to hold open the clam, a prodigious feat. For how long? One of the Chameleon men glanced at Jarl Gare and he saw a picture of darkness descending on the pool. Why, that must be six hours.

The four Venusians stepped off the shell. The clam's writhing muscles and the great writhing muscles of the Jovian's back tensed together.

The Chameleon men stared blankly at the striving pair. Jarl Gare watched passively. If the dumb ox couldn't figure out

that all he had to do was to shove the clam open still further instead of bracing against closure, he would lose the test.

The moments dripped by, became minutes marked by the jumping back and shoulder muscles of the Jovian.

An hour passed sluggishly . . .. Waltk's usually white face became suffused with red. His chest was laboring.

At the end of two hours, Waltk glanced appealingly over his shoulder at Jarl Gare. The Earthman laughed. With a convulsive effort, Waltk pushed back the shells six inches either way.

If he had done that at first, he could have won, Jarl Gare thought, but not now. Waltk's strength had been drained too greatly.

The great shells quivered, moving back. Waltk strained, but the Jovian's great muscles could hold no longer. The Jovian's huge body quivered, the skin grew almost black with his great effort.

The clam had the leverage now. Its white muscles pulsed. The Jovian grunted with pain. There was a deep *thucking* sound. Waltk whimpered.

Then the Jovian stood up. He stared at the blood pulsing from the stumps of his wrists. The clam had sheared off his hands.

"Sorry," Jarl Gare said. And laughed.

The Jovian's face convulsed with fury. Then he relaxed. His moon face was smiling as he looked at Jarl Gare.

"Your turn now," he said.

The Venusians gathered around Waltk. One of them took a pouch from beneath his breech clout. His webbed fingers dug in and came out with a salve that he smeared on the spurting wrist stumps. The blood ceased spurting.

Then the Venusians turned to Jarl Gare.

They circled him, but broke the circle a little to let a wizened Venusian through. He was carrying a Venusian pearl. Jarl Gare gasped at the size of the pearl. He reached out for it, but the old wizened Venusian drew back and a picture grew in Gare's mind.

"You're going to hide it in an oyster shell, and throw that shell in with a pile of others?"

The conical wrinkled head bowed. The wizened oldster reached into a pouch inside his breech clout and pulled out a handful of gray powder. The Venusians moved toward the pool, forcing Jarl Gare to move along with them.

At the pool's edge, the old Venusian dipped in a wrinkled hand and drew out a handful of water. He mixed the water with the powder until it became the consistency of paste. Jarl Gare watched as the old Venusian smeared the oyster shell one of the other Chameleon men handed him with the grayish paste.

Then Jarl Gare saw the great, gray pearl handed to the old man. He placed the pearl in the shell. Then the other Venusians turned Jarl Gare away from the oldster, one of them placing his cold webbed fingers across the Earthman's eyes.

Jarl Gare heard the rattle of the old shells, other rustling motions behind him as he waited. What test was this the Chameleon men were planning?

Finally, the hands dropped from his eyes. He turned around. The oldster was pointing at a huge pile of the oyster shells.

A PICTURE was in Jarl Gare's mind again. So they wanted him to find the shell? That was a fine test! All the shells were gray, and the pile to which the elder pointed was approximately twenty feet high. How could he find one gray shell among so many other gray ones?

He looked up and saw Waltk grinning at him, the stumps of his arms folded.

"How can I find it?" he asked Waltk. "One gray one among so many others?"

"Gray?" asked Waltk. "It is not gray. It sticks out of that pile like a torch. The shell is smeared with red."

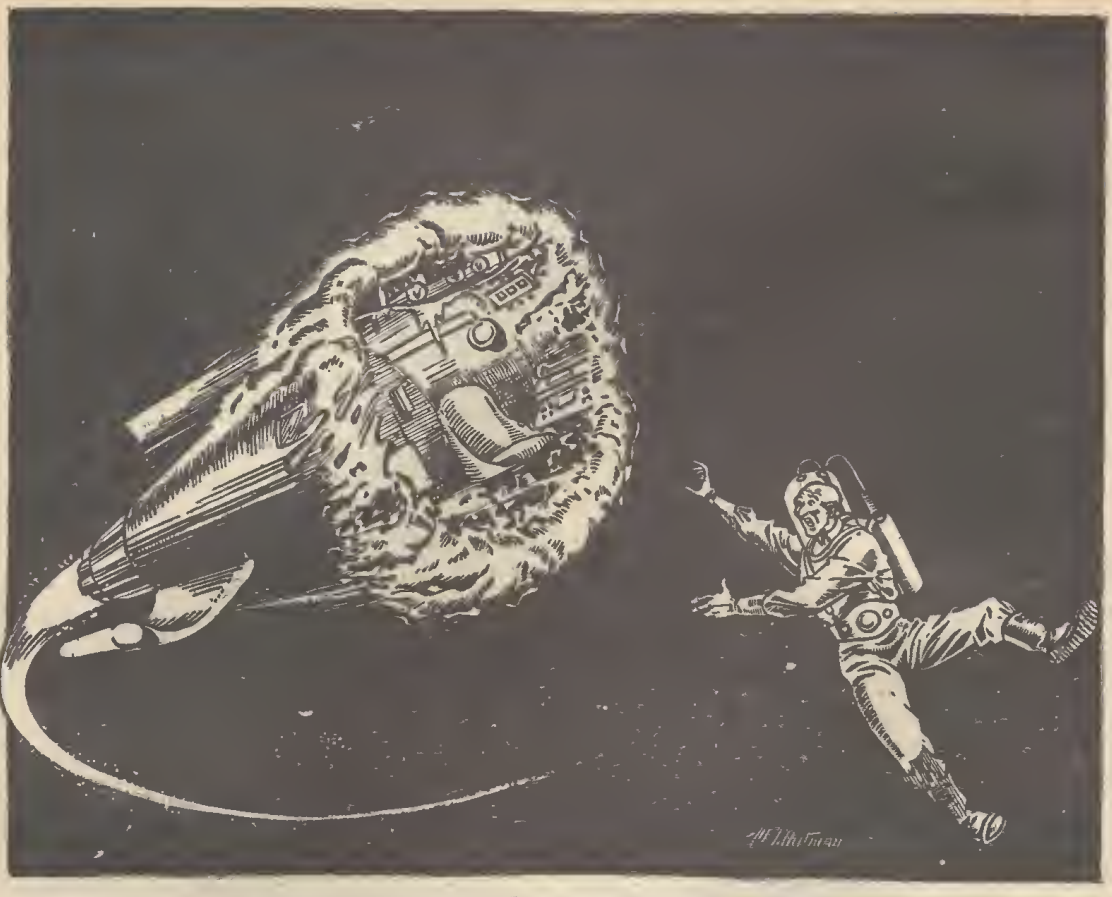
"Red?" asked Jarl Gare curiously. "Red? I see no red."

"That's right," Waltk said, and there was laughter in his voice. "You're color blind, Earthman. I knew it when you first told me the vegetation was gray—that the pearls were gray. The Chameleon men knew it, too. You said they almost could read your mind."

Waltk threw back his head and roared with laughter.

Jarl Gare spun his eyes to the Chameleon men who were watching. A picture grew in his mind. He had until sunset to find the shell—the *red* shell.

And he was color-blind . . .



He began kicking and squirming like a mad dancer.

Escape From Pluto

By WILLIAM OBERFIELD

Exiled to Pluto's harsh wastes, Marcius Kemble listened eagerly to the evil voices planning his triumphant return. But even the Plutonians underestimated the flaming glory to which they sent him.

MARCIUS KEMBLE STOOD UPON the frozen surface of Pluto and swore aloud. He knew there were none to hear him but, just the same, he shouted into his plastic space helmet until his ears were ringing, cursing all the planets and their diverse inhabitants in order, most of all Earth.

You see, Marcius Kemble was an example. He was an example to any others, in the year of twenty-two hundred A.D., who would strive to rule the solar system. The planets were independent states and they were to remain that way. For trying to change this, Kemble had been exiled to unexplored Pluto.

Marcius raised his mailed fist toward the mighty stars and ground out curses against Earth and all those upon it, wishing that he could call upon it the wrath of Heaven and Hell, for it had been the men of Earth who had brought about his ultimate downfall.

It had been the age-old story of a power-mad tyrant finding out the secret grudges of his subjects and working on them to inspire a frenzy of hate, to maneuver them into a war against unsuspecting neighboring nations. He had gained control of the whole of Mars in this way and had been reaching out for the moon-system of Saturn, when the full force of the Planetary,

Combine had come against him, scattering his forces.

The counter offensive had been led by Earth, and it had been an Earth ship which, after his short-lived escape, had parachuted him to the cold surface of Pluto. Is it any wonder that he should hate them?

Marcius Kemble looked fearfully around at the bleak, frozen landscape of Pluto, a cold Hell, hardly reached by the light of the sun. Then he began to laugh.

Marcius laughed into the little plastic world of his helmet and the sound roared back into his own ears, and he laughed louder. Tears streamed down over the contact lenses in his eyes and caused the white mountains to gesticulate and beckon to him.

He was beginning to see it all very clearly now. It wasn't his own laughter in his helmet. The white mountains were laughing at him, the stars and sun were laughing, and all the people of all the planets. It was all concentrated into his ears by the curve of his helmet.

They were spying on him to see what he would do, laughing because he could do nothing, their voices filling his head, asking who he was, what he was going to do now, mocking him. He would show them! Run to the laughing white mountains, cast them into an ocean, crush them beneath his feet! That would put them in their places! Do it now!

Marcius pulled himself to his feet. He knew that he had been running and had fallen, striking his helmet upon something hard, and that he had been laughing, crying and cursing at the same time. The reverberating blow had shocked him into silence. And he was remembering the words of the doctor who had cared for him, back on Mars.

The doctor had said, "You have a great mind, Sire, and a very strong will, but there are some flaws, as in all men. If you should know defeat, your only hope will be death. Living, your mind would refuse to give up, beating itself into insanity against a blank wall."

Now, Marcius knew what the doctor had meant. There were still the voices in his mind repeating over and over, "Who are you?—Who are you?" almost as if they were mocking the beating of his heart.

There was something strange about the voices, Marcius thought. It was as if there were some alien intelligence behind them There were two of them, and they seemed to require an answer from him. It was with no great hope that he answered the voices by concentrating upon his name and present predicament.

THE thoughts of Marcius Kemble did not go unheard. Unknown to the rest of the solar system, Pluto had its inhabitants. To Earth men, these would be very strange beings, not alone in appearance but in composition. Their heads were roughly triangular, widening upward from a pointed chin and resting on thin, yet strong, necks above equally strong and spindly man-like bodies. They were mainly composed of elements which became solid only at very low temperatures.

Thus it was that one of these beings sat before a radio-like device and perspired in the extreme cold of the room. His long pointed ears were depressed by the weight of a shiny metal cap and his too-large eyes held a look of worried consternation. The reason for his consternation was the thoughts of the ex-dictator of Mars.

The wearer of the cap shot a series of rapid sounds at the other occupant of the room.

He said, in effect, "I have received thought emanations from the direction of the great plain, rather garbled. The being is probably a giant from some other world, for his thoughts are alien and he evidently considers it within his power to crush the mountains which house us!"

The other made a negative gesture with a slender hand. "Don't you think it is more likely that it is a trick of the enemy to frighten us, Gor? They have tried such things before, you know."

Gor was quiet while he peered into the eyepiece of an instrument; then he replied, "We will soon know. Tower Three has made contact, giving us the exact location, and the inquisitors have now gone to work on him."

For a while, the two Plutonians busied themselves with their various machines, then Gor spoke again. "You are radiating sorrow, Bakar. What troubles you?"

Bakar sighed. "I was thinking of the ancient pictures of Ahndee in the days when its orbit was much nearer the sun,

and we, the inhabitants of Ahndee, were happy in our beautiful cities.

"Now, the two remaining great nations hide, one from the other, beneath the mountains, and neither can break the defenses of the other, but still we try. What is the use of it?"

"Careful, Bakar," Gor looked sternly at the other. "The Four may have you in the thought beam. You know that The Four lead us along this path because it is the only choice, the path shown in the future machine.

"In the time you speak of," Gor went on, "the people were no better off than we of today. Because they did not have the future machine, they had failures. They wandered from the way and their failures turned them back to the course provided by the natural law. Now we know for what we are bound and, if we work toward that end, can know no failures."

A strange light came into Bakar's eyes, but he said nothing.

Shortly thereafter, a voice drifted into the room. It was a mild voice, but it was also old and wise.

The voice said, "This is Nel, one of The Four. The being on the plain has been probed and analyzed and has been found to be a creature of the carbon class from the inner worlds. He has sought to deceive us in the manner in which he has deceived his own, but we have seen all.

"The being is of a race called man and is named Mah Shuss Kem Bil. He is clothed in a type of space armour which embodies an air purifier, good for a period of time long enough to transport him to the fourth planet at half the speed of light, and is protected against cold by electric and tonic stimulants which do not produce heat, but only suspend the sensation of cold. Therefore we may come in contact with him without fear of burns.

"Since the future machine indicates that he must be sent back into space, and since there is no place for him in our world, he will be disposed of at once. Tower Two will dispatch two ships. The man will be instructed in the operation of one of the ships and sent on his way. The pilots will return in the other ship. That is all."

For a long moment, quiet filled the room.

Gor was uneasy as he said, "Well, Bakar, have you not heard? It is your duty to dispatch the ships. Why do you hesitate?"

Bakar sprung to his feet, a small weapon clutched in his claw-like hand. "No!" he hissed, "I will not obey the machine. I am going to prove to you, and to all, that it can be wrong. You know of the soft places in the plain, Gor. It is a wonder that the man did not land in one of these, considering that there are more of these than solid ground. But he will weary of waiting for the ships, which he has been informed of, and begin to wander. He cannot go far before he is swallowed up, sinking deeper and deeper. Then we shall see if the future machine is always right!"

Gor said nothing, but a slight smile came to his lips, a rather ironic one.

It was much later when Gor again spoke. He turned from his position at the thought receiver and said, "News for you, Bakar. I have just received thought that the man is on his way."

Bakar visibly started, and Gor continued, "How many times have you complied with an order from The Four and pressed the button that informs second in command that you had done so? Force of habit caused you to perform it this time, Bakar. The order went on, through second in command."

He added softly, "The future machine never lies!"

MARCIUS KEMBLE stood upon the frozen plain and waited. A satanic smile lighted his face and the cry for revenge was in his heart. He somehow felt that the thoughts had not lied, that they would send the promised ship. Then he would be free again, blasting back to quench his thirst for revenge against the Combine. His face became flushed and the temperature within his suit became perceptibly greater, as he formed his fanatical plans. While he waited, the leaders of the Combine, in his mind, suffered and died a thousand times.

The coming of the ships was swift. One moment there was nothing; the next, they rested upon the plain before him. Marcius was surprised to note that they were very small, as compared to others he had seen. So much the better, he thought, to elude the space patrol.

He also marveled at the fact that the creatures coming toward him from the

ships were lightly clothed, and that they could speak to him through his mind.

"Do not fear us," came the thought. "You must come with us into one of the craft, to learn of the controls."

Inside the ship, Marcius found that "learning of the controls" was much simpler than he had thought it would be.

He sat in the pilot's seat, hands on the controls and eyes closed. A thousand times more effective than words, thoughts came to him, and he flew the Plutonian ship through every condition and position that could ever be encountered, even though he never left the place at which the ship had come to rest on the plain. Mental instruction.

It all ended with Marcius Kemble, condemned dictator of Mars, soaring away from Pluto forever, still enclosed in his space suit because the air within the ship was never meant for the lungs of men, and heading toward earth, toward the fulfillment of his evil plans.

As the atmosphere of Pluto fell away behind him, Marcius wondered that he felt no acceleration. Then he remembered a faint something which he had detected in the thoughts of his instructor, something about increased momentum being induced into each individual atom, so that each retained its normal position to that of every other.

But Marcius was not the kind to spend much time on thinking of such complicated matters. Instead, he lapsed into an ecstasy of evil dreams, dreams in which he was again the mighty monarch, this time of Earth.

AS THE little ship drove on through space, Marcius pictured himself walking in on the members of the Council—he would have gained his rightful place as ruler by then, of course—and chuckled at the expressions he imagined on their faces, mouths hanging open, eyes many times too large, and their heads hanging nearly to their belts.

Someone was kneeling before him. It was the Martian member and his eyes were tightly closed against the stinging tears while his thin hands were clasped before him, praying to Marcius to have mercy.

Marcius was about to order them strung end to end and dangled, for the rest of their lives from an over-hanging cliff, when he became aware of his present surroundings with a start. Time to start decelerating.

Sighing, he reached for the proper lever and pulled it back.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then the ship seemed to shake itself and Marcius was half lifted from his seat. It couldn't be! The decelerating force should act equally on his body and the ship. How, then, could he be thrown forward?

Something bumped lightly against his helmet and drifted on by. Only for a moment did he stare blankly at the little silvery sphere, then the nose of the ship came away with a weird plopping hiss, and he was jerked through the opening by the force of the escaping air.

In confusion, he tried to swing his body around so that he could see what had happened. He twisted his shoulders around, but his hips turned equally in an opposite direction. To halt one meant to halt the other. He tried kicking his legs back hard, but only succeeded in arching his body and wrenching his back. Desperately, he began kicking and squirming like a mad dancer. Each motion depended upon an equal and opposite motion of his body.

In the midst of his struggles, his heel struck on something and started him spinning, head over heels. It was the ship. The combined gravities of the ship and his own body had brought them together again, and he was revolving about the heavier object in a close orbit, and he was turning end for end, now.

Marcius could not feel the motion. It seemed as if the universe were turning about his stationary body, rising at his head and setting at his feet.

He saw the ship then, but it was no longer a ship. It dawned on him why the Plutonians had never ventured much nearer the sun, and why, after they had known all about him, they had let him go.

Receding from him, was a perfect sphere of liquid mercury, once the hard hull of a space ship, covered with a thin layer of water that had once been windows, with small pieces of solid material floating on the surface. It was only a natural law that it should revert to this form when deprived of the sub-temperatures of Pluto.

Yes, Marcius Kemble saw it all now, but too late. He remembered a demonstration

he had seen when a child. A man had poured mercury into a mold and cooled it to near absolute zero. When withdrawn from the mold, it had been a little bell that gave a clear tone.

Why hadn't he thought of it before? The cold bodies of the Plutonians enabled them to handle such metals as he would handle steel! They made their ships and machines of such things as mercury and ice, and perhaps a few materials unknown to man, but all of a low melting point. Why should they do otherwise, when the extreme cold of Pluto made those things as hard as steel? It was even doubtful if they could produce enough heat to melt steel or even glass, or if they could produce a substance able to retain such fires.

A hot rage began to boil within him. The Plutonians had known it all along! With their science they could have kept him alive until they had learned how to build a ship that would not melt from the heat of the sun.

Now, Marcius Kemble's unretarded speed carried him through the orbit of the earth while it was still many thousands of miles distant. He began to feel the boiling heat of the sun and realized what it would be like when the insulation of his space suit gave way to that awful heat, but he decided that he would never live to suffer it. Better to let the vacuum of space draw his life from him quickly and painlessly.

Slowly, he reached up to unscrew his helmet. He gave it a slight tug, then twisted with all his might. The helmet did not budge. For a moment he could not think clearly. Then it came to him. The air pressure within the suit was so great, in relation to the vacuum of space, that it bound the threads together with a friction that he could never hope to overcome!

With fear-filled eyes, he watched the hot disk of the sun expand around him as he fell toward it.

The system would soon be rid of Marcius Kemble.

PS's Feature Flash

ERIK FENNEL first hit us with the highly original *Atavism*, in the Spring Issue, but he's given us further honeys—such as *Beneath the Red World's Crust*, in this issue—and you'd better keep an eye on him.

During a childhood spent running barefoot around Hawaii I developed prehensile toes, and ever since have had to listen to cracks about Darwin's theory being reversible. My wife, Eve, and our dachshund, Lilith, hold long and earnest conversations about my shortcomings. The dog insists I must have been an anti-social problem child.

I wasn't. But, oh, I was an inventive little devil! Once I built a gadget intended to scare birds out of the garden, a propeller that swung little metal weights against a large Chinese gong. It was dead calm the afternoon I finished it, so disgustedly I set it under my father's bedroom window and forgot it. The trade winds started at 2:47 A.M. Ouch!

My kid sister kept invading my room so I wired a Model "T" spark coil to the doorknob. Mother touched it first. Ouch again! Then there was a cute little deal involving molten lead and cold water. Double-ouch! The explosion was just short of atomic and I still carry the scars.

Somehow I survived to tramp around half a dozen universities, studying co-eds, engineering, co-eds, journalism, and co-eds, and to fly a termite-riddled Heath Parasol that needed no running lights because the No. 4 cylinder glowed red hot all the time.

I worked here and there as a truckdriver, newspaper reporter, bootlegger's assistant, cameraman, payroll gun-guard, teletype operator, gas pumper, machinist, and did my share of riding the rods.

Got into structural steel work and loved it, as I seem to have been born without a normal fear of heights. It promised a short life expectancy, but good money and indescribable thrills. I followed the red iron from hell to breakfast, six hundred feet above ground and four hundred feet below, and would be at it yet except that one day there was a very nasty mess. When I got out of the hospital I had a retread job in my skull and no stereoptic vision. End of chapter. 4-F. Readjustment.

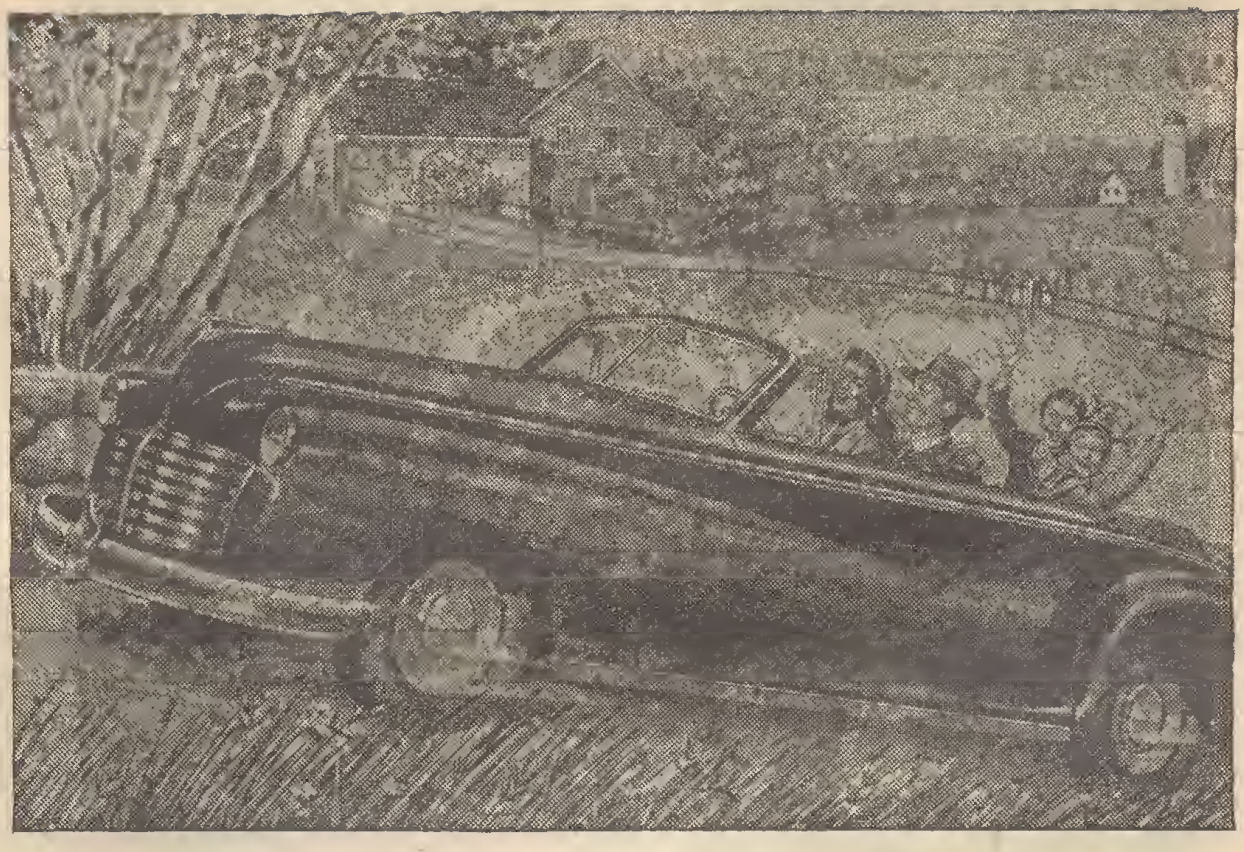
I've had the writing bug ever since I can remember—that's why my wife accuses me of arrested development—and I started reading science-fiction in the old *Science and Invention* days.

We've spent the last four years in a house trailer. Eve is developing a frustration complex because she can't rearrange the built-in furniture without using an axe, and I'm still trying to devise a portable basement for my workshop. Perhaps, if I can acquire a couple of used oil wells and cut them into short lengths—

At present I am engaged in some deep autohypnotic research into the permutations of the Theory of the Perversity of Inanimate Objects, but if a few more editors will be as astute as Mr. Payne and recognize the sterling merit of my deathless prose I may be able to become a credit to some community or other.

Nichevo.

—ERIK FENNEL.



This car is running with an "EMPTY" gas tank!

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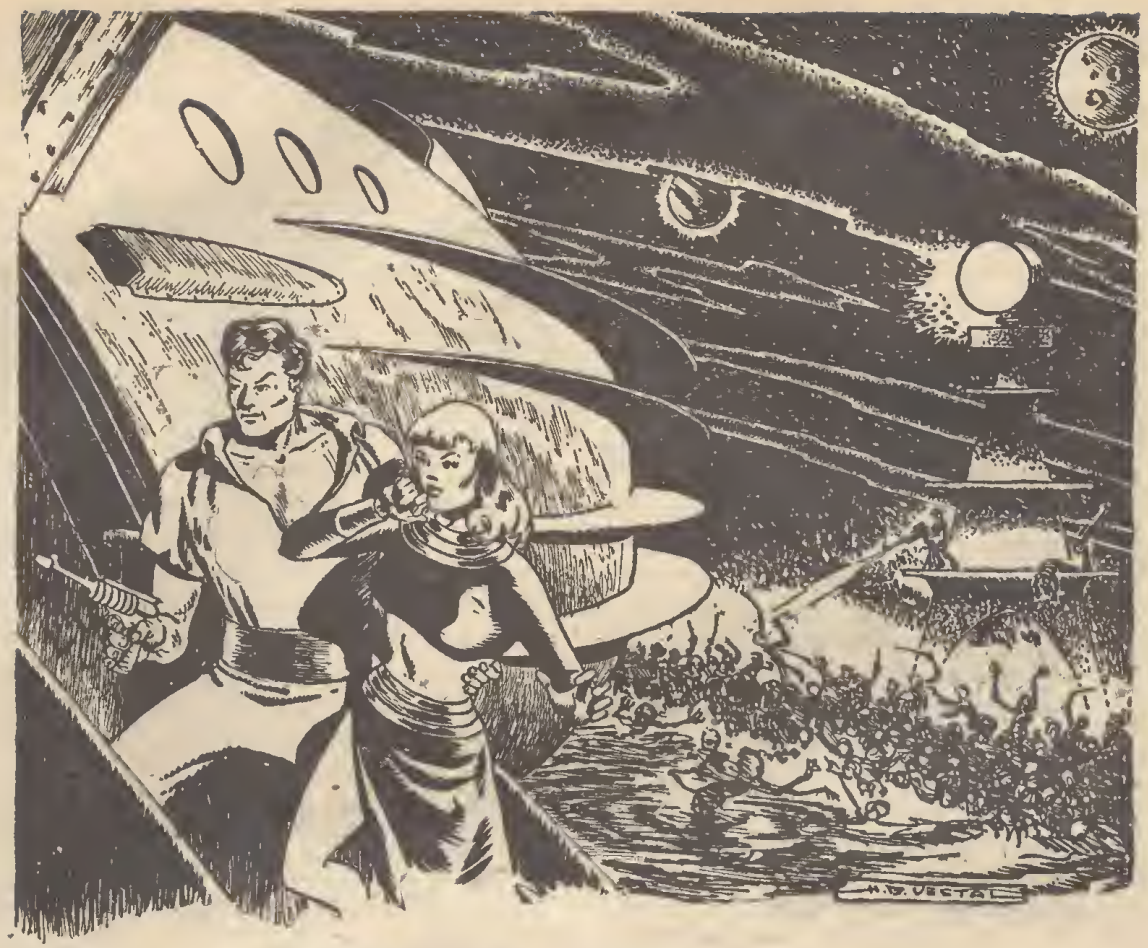


His sentence ended in a bellow of terror

BENEATH THE RED WORLD'S CRUST

By Erik Fennel

The ancient leviathan heaved mightily in the vast buried cavern, pumping water upward as it had been told. Only hunted Nick Tinker knew that more than just water was coming to the dust-dry surface!

THE HOT, HIGH WHINE scorched past his face and the slug splatted into the eroded grey wall beside him. He should have died then, but his instinctive recoil at feeling something sticky and moist beneath his feet saved him.

Nick Tinker let himself crumple and fall, a trick which during the War days back on Earth had fooled more than one sniper. His left hand slid under his padded jacket toward his gun, but the movement looked as though he were clutching his chest. His right arm landed outstretched, and he let that hand clutch convulsively at the air. Then he lay very still beneath the unwinking Martian stars while the thin, chilling night wind whispered through the deserted, sand-drifted streets.

The Gravinol was gradually leaving his brain, leaving him feeling fully alive for the first time since he had entered the Special Corps back on Earth at the age of seventeen. He wasn't sure he liked being so completely alive, for it was all he could do to keep his body from cringing under

the expectation of another, better-aimed bullet. The stoic fatalism was gone.

He lay motionless, but his trained senses were busily sorting the eerie impressions of this undead Martian city, picking out a sensation of—someone watching. The feeling localized itself on an oval opening in the hulking black building across the wide street. His gun hand moved imperceptibly and his jacket tore and smoldered as he fired. The recoil slide of the heavy automatic thumped a bruise against his ribs, and even as the explosive bullet flared against the window's edge he was on his feet, zigzagging across the street in a stooping rush to flatten himself against the wall.

He watched the greenish light of a glow-plate seeping from the window, hoping for a glimpse of the sniper's silhouette. The window had been dark before, but his bullet had evidently damaged the screen-creature that covered the window. He knew the screen-creatures well, the living, amorphous and deadly remnants of a Martian civilization that still guarded almost every opening in this abandoned city, rendering it so hazardous for unwary Earthmen.

His groping hands found the narrow entrance to the building and he ducked in. Someone had been there before him, and recently, for the door-creature inside the alcove hung in tattered shreds. One of its torn, limp folds touched his hand as he passed, and with a sudden resurgence of alien life it contracted around his wrist. It tried to unleash its deadly shock, but it was weak and Nick felt only a faint tingle.

He jerked free and went up the inside ramp at a fast but quiet run, his finger ready on the trigger as he neared the top.

Then Nick stopped dead as he saw his target. The girl looked hardly more than a child. Her tattered blouse was pulled aside and she was mopping blindly at a bleeding gash low on one shoulder. The back of her other hand scrubbed at her closed eyes. Her face, framed in uncombed coppery hair, was peppered with grey freckles of rock dust thrown by Nick's explosive bullet.

His boots gritting in the dust, warned her, for she whirled, opening red-rimmed, watering eyes and snatching up a heavy rifle.

It would have been an easy shot, but Nick did not fire.

HER RIFLE spat once into its silencer as he dived across the room and they went to the floor together. For a minute he was fully occupied in avoiding her teeth and fingernails and shrewdly placed kicks as she fought with the desperation of terror, but at last he got a grip on her hair and clipped her once on the point of the chin.

He spat out a mouthful of acrid dust and tore the remains of her blouse into strips. There was haste and no gentleness in the way he tied her hands and feet. The exertion left him panting in the thin Martian air, so he took a breath of oxygen from his pocket sniffer bottle. Then, wanting to talk to the girl at once, he held the nosepiece to her face.

He knew when she recovered consciousness, for her head twisted suddenly and her teeth sank into his hand. He slapped her face hard, and she lay staring up at him with hatred and terror.

"You're Susan Jones," he declared.

"Murderer!" she spat, her face twisted with loathing.

He followed her glance to his uniform and laughed mirthlessly. "I'm outlawed," he snorted. "The Mec is after me just as hot as they're after you. I disobeyed orders."

She looked at him unbelievingly, suspecting some sort of trap. She knew from experience the ruthless resourcefulness of the Martian Exploitation Company.

"You couldn't disobey," she said incredulously. "You couldn't."

"Like hell," he snapped. "I've had no Gravinol for six weeks. Now, where's your father?"

His temper flared as her lips set in a stubborn line. He had no time to lose.

"I'll make you talk, damn you!"

The rush of treads and whine of brakes from the street interrupted him, sending him to the window with gun ready. The screen-creature, still alive with the almost unkillable vitality of those alien things, had dragged itself together to cover the opening again. Nick was careful not to touch it. He peered out, knowing that to the

men climbing from the armored half-track the window would appear dark. The screen-creatures passed light in one direction only. As quietly as possible he closed the sliding panel at the top of the ramp and pushed in the locking plug.

"Remember, get the old man alive. Stun him if necessary, but alive. That's orders from The Man himself." Nick recognized Colonel Hammer's voice. The search must be tightening if the commandant himself took charge of a patrol. They were after Professor Jones and his daughter, but Nick knew that he too would be shot on sight. This time he was with the hunted instead of the hunters.

The girl's face went white as he drew his sheath knife. Then she stared uncomprehendingly as the blade slit her bonds instead of her throat.

"Over the roofs," he whispered. "Which way out?"

She pointed, still uncertain of his intentions.

A big man in a uniform like Nick's own lay sprawled on the floor of the adjoining room, a black circle between his eyes. Nick spared him just one glance. And then he understood the sticky-moist splotch he had encountered in the street. The man with the straggly beard had caused it, bleeding his life away through the gaping rent in his chest.

The girl ignored Nick's ready pistol and ran to the low couch on which the old man reclined. "Dad!" she called softly, shaking his shoulder. "Dad!"

Nick pulled her away and shook his head. Jackson Jones, the first man to reach Mars, was dead.

"Shoot that panel down!" someone yelled from the ramp. "He's in there!"

"Wanna get took by the back-blast?" another voice complained. "Stand back."

"Which way?" Nick asked quietly.

The girl darted to a window and Nick caught his breath as she reached toward the guarding screen-creature. Then he stared for, instead of killing her with its strange powers, the rubbery, no-color, living stuff flowed back into grooves in the edge of the stone. Susan gave one last backward glance at her father's body and scrambled through.

Nick followed nervously and sprawled beside her on a narrow roof ledge. She touched the screen-creature again and it closed with a silent, oily motion.

"It felt my thoughts," she whispered.

He dragged her to her feet and they ran through the dim starlight, climbing across the uneven roofs, leaping the chasms between buildings in the darkness. Excited yells as the patrol broke through the panel and found the two bodies speeded them onward. The girl held her own, keeping the fast pace Nick set, although a few times he had to help her swing her slender body from a lower roof to a higher one.

"Down!" he barked suddenly. A jet of orange light flung itself upward and outward behind them as someone turned a flame gun on the window through which they had escaped.

"There she is!"

An automatic roared a long burst. From a roof in the opposite direction from where they crouched behind a projecting cornice a *cajora* screamed as it tumbled, astonishingly like a woman in agony.

"You got her, Fred!" someone yelled triumphantly. "Nice shooting!"

Susan shovered, not entirely from the cold.

"What now?" she asked.

"Hide."

THE PAUSE had given Nick time to get his bearings. Searchlights from a dozen cars were lancing through the city, and he knew they had to get under cover before flares flooded the roofs with brilliance. He found the hole in which he had hidden during the day, a spot of deeper blackness beneath an overhanging ledge, and motioned Susan inside.

Instead of following immediately he belly-crawled to the edge of the flat roof. Two armored cars were approaching, still hidden from each other by the curving street, but he could see them both.

Anger at his pursuers burned fiercely inside him, anger and the deep-seated prejudice against purely defensive action that was a legacy from the Special Corps days on Earth.

Smiling grimly, he unslung the rifle he had taken from the girl and sent a single bullet richocheting harmlessly off the turret of each car.

Then he followed Susan. Even through the massive stone walls of the building

they could hear the whistling roar of two proton cannon—firing at each other. Colonel Hammer would be displeased with the survivors, Nick reflected with grim amusement.

They paused just inside the black hole to let their labored breathing return to normal. It seemed to go right through the building, between inner and outer shells.

"We'd better climb down and hope it goes deep enough," he said at last. The Martian Exploitation Company had a little gadget, outgrowth of the last War on Earth, which could detect the presence of living creatures through a hundred feet of solid rock.

"This passage will join the tunnels," the girl said with quiet confidence. "We can dodge their detectors."

"What tunnels? You been here?" he asked sharply, trying to see her face in the blackness.

"No, but a *vora* made this."

Nick didn't understand, but there was no time for hesitation. They climbed down, into an underworld of blackness and silence. He went first, searching out niches in the almost vertical shaft with his toes, lowering his body, reaching overhead to guide Susan's feet. Once one of them dislodged a sliver of rock that bounced and clicked into the depths for what seemed like minutes. His mind was seething with questions but the treacherous shaft required his full attention.

Only the light gravity of Mars made the climb possible, and even then his muscles were stiff and aching when at last his feet touched a solid floor and they sprawled in what the echoes of their heavy breathing told them was a roughly horizontal tunnel. He estimated they had come at least a mile straight downward, perhaps more.

For a long time they lay without moving in the powder-fine sand that had penetrated even here.

"We've got to steal a ship," he voiced the thought uppermost in his mind. Already he had accepted this girl as a partner in his venture, for she too was a fugitive from the tyranny of the Martian Exploitation Company.

Her body jerked suddenly at his words, and then he had to fumble for her in the darkness and shake her with brutal insistence until her hysterical laughter stopped.

"Just steal a ship!" she gasped finally, her voice still unsteady. "Dad and I tried for a year, ever since the Exploiters came and wrecked our *Trailblazer*. And now they've killed him!" She began to sob, but this time in sadness rather than hysteria.

Nick was frantic for the missing fragments of the puzzle, but he knew it would be useless to question her now. She began to shiver in the chill, so he removed his torn jacket and slipped it around her naked shoulders. After a while she sobbed herself to sleep, too exhausted and grief-stricken to care any more what happened to her.

Nick dozed too, but the dregs of Gravinol still in his system denied him the release of complete forgetfulness. In disconnected, nightmarish flashes his mind reviewed the chain of events that had made him a hunted outlaw upon an alien planet.

There was a bittersweetness to his thoughts of Earth, a nostalgic homesickness for the planet of great cities and green foliage and free-flowing water it had been before the War—and might some day be again.

And then the War itself. The boyish, unthinking enthusiasm with which he had enlisted in the Special Corps. The new drug, Gravinol, touted by the laboratories of the great Harmon Enterprises as the discovery that would win the War. Twisting, writhing rocket fights high above the atmosphere, pilots of the Corps immersed in hypnotic, Gravinol-induced blind loyalty to the Cause, immune to fatigue and pain and fear.

City after city crumbling to atomic dust. Rocket bases blasted out of existence and no more targets worth bombing. Complex weapons giving way to more primitive ones as industrial systems broke down. The Special Corps transferred from air to ground duty. Crumbling battle lines, disintegration of organized warfare into deadly confusion in which friend and foe were indistinguishable.

PEACE. Peace without victory, without decision. Peace of destruction. Battles dying into scattered skirmishes that eventually died of their own inertia.

Disillusion and disgust. But it was peace.

Realization that Gravinol, hurriedly released upon the world without proper testing, was incompatible with any civilized system and at the same time incurably habit forming. Gravinol outlawed by the reviving New Governments. The few hundred survivors of the Special Corps, Nick among them, roaming the face of Earth in a desperate, frustrating search for the few grams still in existence, ready to commit any crime to ease their torment, clinging with fanatical, drug-inculcated loyalty to a Cause that had died with the War's end, looking endlessly for a new Cause to which to fasten their drug-inflamed energies, shunned and avoided and feared and hated by those persons not in the grip of Gravinol.

The whispered rumor that had led him to that office, miraculously untouched amid the ruins of Chicago. Listening to the young man with the cold eyes—he had never learned his name—as he told of the Jones Drive and the double Cause of protecting Earth and making Mars a fit new world for human colonization.

"And this," the man had said, casually rolling a tiny red pellet of Gravinol across the broad desk into Nick's clutching fingers. "All you want."

Central Camp, the Martian Exploitation Company's base on the red desert, and indoctrination under the thought machines. Plenty of Gravinol, to be had for the asking, and the companionship of other old members of the Corps. Flashing out in a wonderfully responsive fighter rocket to strafe and destroy a skulking Martie or two. Months without unhappiness, without a single emotional response not conditioned by the Gravinol and the thought machines.

Then one night the glow of a spaceship landing far to the East, and Colonel Hammer's orders.

"That ship is not authorized by Headquarters. Bomb it! And you, Tinker, photograph the results. The Man wants proof."

Silvery hull against red sand. Small derrick drilling for the water Nick knew they would never find, for even the Exploiters had failed. A few tents. Men and women and half a dozen children waving excited greetings. Ship and tents obscured as the bombs detonated. And when the dust cleared—nothing.

Liquidation of the potential independent colony had made no impression at the time, but now in this tunnel far beneath the surface Nick clenched his fists and bit his lip as he thought of the callous brutality of it.

THEN, weeks afterward, that card game quarrel with Jake Alaimo. Patrol the next day, and rockets failing far out over the bleak and deadly desert. Fuel gauges showing full but tanks empty, radio dead, and Alaimo's note on the mechanic's service card.

Starting the impossibly long walk back to base. Eyes tortured by the harsh sunlight. Thirst. Beginnings of the gnawing craving for Gravinol.

Memories of the tortures he had endured brought Nick wide awake in the tunnel, all his muscles tightening momentarily as though to begin the twitching spasm typical of denied Gravinol addiction.

He seemed to remember collapsing in the shadow of a rocky outcropping, and as he had fainted he had known he was dying. He had been so near dead that his eyes remained vacantly open, and in his unconsciousness he had seen—he thought—strange creatures that were tall and green and somehow *thin* in consistency. Like Marties. And there had been darkness and coolness after the blazing heat of the desert. Yes, and even wetness, wetness on arid Mars where all water was tanked in from Earth. He couldn't remember, but something had happened.

Days later a patrol had found him by chance, and back at Central Camp the medical staff had been skillful. But they were human and had therefore overlooked the obvious fact that he had gone three weeks without Gravinol. And for some reason he himself could not understand he had remained silent, battling the recurrent temptation as he recovered. Something—perhaps bodily dehydration, perhaps heat, perhaps the actinic rays of the sun that had turned his skin almost to leather—something out there on the desert had enabled him to evade the death that usually followed deprivation of Gravinol.

One day when he was stronger and the recurring craving had all his nerves screaming, he had called Jake Alaimo out for a barehanded duel and snapped his neck with an edgewise chop of his palm. But when Colonel Hammer had congratulated him he had only felt annoyance. He was beginning to think for himself once more.

II

A SOUND IN THE TUNNEL broke into his reverie, bringing him instantly to the alert. Soft padding footsteps. He drew his gun and aimed at the sound.

"Don't!" Susan's hand dragged his gun down. "It won't hurt us."

"Huh?" Indoctrination had taught that everything that moved upon Mars was hostile, to be killed on sight. The impulse was still strong.

"It's a *cajora.* The Martians keep them as pets," she insisted.

Nick's scalp crawled as the big animal glided through the darkness and its coarse fur made sandpaper sounds against Susan's legs. He had seen the six-legged beasts on the surface, large as Earth tigers.

"Mel nikko twa Klev," Susan said soothingly. *"Mel nikko twa Klev?"*

The creature purred.

Nick kept his gun ready and swung toward the girl. She could feel him tense with suspicion. Indoctrination had impressed upon Nick's mind the story that Jackson Jones and his daughter had turned traitor to Earth, siding in with the dangerous and degenerate Marties.

"What'd you say?" he asked.

"That's Martian." Her answer was matter-of-fact. "I asked him where Klev is."

"Martian?" Nick was astonished. "Have they a real language? Then they're really intelligent?" He had suspected but hadn't known.

"Of course," she whispered. "Ssh! You're disturbing the *cajora.*"

"What's Klev? What do you want?"

"He's a Martian. My friend," she answered, and talked to the *cajora* again as though it were a dog or cat.

"I think he understands," she said after a little. "Keep your hand on him and follow."

Nick was hesitant, but the only alternative was to remain in the pitch black, musty tunnel.

For hours they shuffled blindly along, their hands meeting in the loose fur of the beast's neck. The tunnel sloped downward, turning right and left so that within minutes Nick was hopelessly lost. Time and again his outstretched fingers, trailing along the wall, encountered the emptiness of side tunnels and branchings, but the *cajora* moved purposefully ahead. Several times Nick tried to talk, to ask the questions which were perplexing him, but each time the girl silenced him.

"You'll distract the *cajora,"* she warned.

The animal stopped short as they rounded a turn and saw a glimmer of light ahead.

"They don't like light," she explained. "We'll have to go on alone."

The light came from a cross tunnel, from patches of some glowing substance in the hard, smooth walls. The tunnel was roughly circular in section, large enough for Nick to walk upright despite his height.

He whistled in amazement.

"Who built these?" he asked, for they had come several miles in darkness and now the lighted tunnel stretched away into the distance, a major engineering project.

"The Martians."

"How?"

"With their *voras."*

He wanted to ask her to explain, but she was examining some markings on the walls, combinations of triangles and curved lines that were obviously writing. She seemed to understand them, and Nick began to understand now how she and her father had evaded the Mec patrols so long. The leaders of the Martian Exploitation Company did not even suspect the existence of this extensive underground labyrynth.

"We're a long way from Klev's home," the girl declared. "The faster we get there the better."

"Why? What's the danger? The Mecs won't follow us down here?"

"Martians."

"Huh? I thought you were friends with them."

She shook her head sadly.

"Only a few now. The rest have grown to hate us. Come on."

They had covered several more miles when they were stopped. Susan's faint gasp sent Nick's hand automatically to his holster and he looked up to see three Martians emerging from a side tunnel just ahead.

He stared. They were the first living Martians he had seen at really close range, and the bodies of those hunted down by the patrols had always been as crumpled and collapsed as spiders caught in the flame of a blowtorch.

THEY were slightly taller than humans, with great glowing eyes in their bulging heads and thin, many-fingered arms that reached almost to the knee joints of their stubby legs. Their noses were almost flat and their mouths too small, and their heads were topped by erect crests of skinlike material. Two of them were a dull greenish color, but the third, evidently the leader, had a marked bluish tinge to his face. All three wore shapeless brown clothing.

The three made no threatening move at first, but training and the habit of self-preservation were still strong in Nick. He raised his gun.

Before he could fire something uncoiled itself from the shoulders of the leading Martian and flapped down the tunnel like an ugly, distorted bat. It knocked him off balance as it struck his head and shoulders and clung there, heavy and warm and *alive*. Numbness raced through his body wherever it touched. His muscles refused to respond when he tried to squeeze the trigger and his struggles only brought part of the thing around his throat in a powerful, strangling grip.

Susan called out something in the same language she had used to the *cajora* and took the pistol from his helpless fingers. But to his dismay she did not raise it.

The Martian made a chirping, almost inaudible sound and the thing relaxed its throttling grasp. Feeling began to return to Nick's arms. He could feel tiny pulsations running through the boneless, rubbery mass that still clung tightly to his shoulders.

Susan had made no move to help him. Now she cringed back at the look on his face, a look that spelled murder. He reached for her, but instantly his arms fell limp and numb again as the Martian chirped.

"You sold me out to these—these," he gritted. "You slimy little doublecrosser!"

One of the Martians interrupted, directing a sharp, chirping question at Sue.

She looked down at the jacket she wore, Nick's uniform jacket, and shook her head negatively.

The Martian made an angry gesture, and under Nick's baleful stare she unfastened the garment and dropped it. Equipment in the pockets clanked against the stone floor. The girl blushed beneath the dirt that covered her face.

The blue-complexioned Martian scooped up the discarded jacket with one long arm, and meekly Susan extended the pistol as he spoke again. The Martian held it against his waist, and immediately what Nick had assumed to be part of his clothing formed a pouch around it. The clothing was *alive* too, he realized.

The three aliens watched them through bulging eyes and conferred in a series of chirps and clicks.

"What are they saying?" Nick demanded, a bit confused by the turn events were taking. They weren't treating the girl in too friendly a fashion.

"That you're an Exploiter, and because of that damned jacket that I joined the Exploiters too. If only we could have reached Klev first!"

She broke into the Martians' discussion. *"Mel nikko ne cho ke twa Klev."*

The Martians focused their attention on her, their voices taking on a note of uncertainty. She spoke to the bluish one at length, and at last he shook his head dubiously, making sweeping gestures to indicate movement.

"We'd better go," Susan said dully.

"Just where do you stand with these things?" Nick asked anxiously as they walked. It was the most urgent question of the moment.

"I don't quite know any more." Her voice betrayed her uncertainty. "They liked Dad and me at first, and when we

came back from Earth the second time many of them even came out into the sunlight to meet us. But then the Exploiters came. It was only because they blasted the *Trailblazer* and opened fire on Dad and me too that the Martians didn't kill us right then."

"Then they weren't hostile at first? Weren't they plotting a war on Earth?"

"Of course not." Her tone was scathing. "They were just friendly and sick and dispirited and dying. They couldn't even live on Earth."

"Then why did your father organize the Mec?"

Susan halted in mid-stride and her stinging two-handed slaps left angry marks across his face.

"Say anything like that again and I'll scratch your eyes out!" she spat.

"But your father—"

"He did not!" she snapped. "What he told Gerald Harmon was—"

"Harmon?"

One of the Martians clucked impatiently and motioned them to move along.

Nick recognized the name. Gerald Harmon was the ruler of Earth's greatest industrial combine, Harmon Enterprises. From his factories had come the War's most deadly weapons, and Gravinol had been developed in his laboratories. A finger in every pie and a profit for every finger had always been the Harmon method.

"Harmon told Dad he'd send out colonists as soon as things could be arranged in an orderly manner and another ship built, and he persuaded Dad to keep it secret that we had reached Mars on our first flight. Harmon had backed Dad's work, so Dad trusted him in spite of everything people said. And people were right. When his first ship came . . . that cold-blooded murderer—"

She sobbed, unable to continue.

ANOTHER piece of the puzzle clicked into place in Nick's brain. During the last months of the War when governments were merely hunted groups of men blasted out of one underground shelter after another, when armies went on killing because there was no one to tell them to stop, when work and comfort and productive effort and all the normalities of life had vanished in the dust of ruined cities, the great masses of people who wished only to live out their lives in peace had at last learned their lesson. At last it had been thoroughly beaten into their skulls that wars were the inevitable price of over-organization, of allowing a few individuals—whether politicians or industrialists or the priests of hatred-creeds made little difference—to assume unlimited power over the fates of others. The people had learned, and they were bitterly determined it should not happen again. It was because of this lesson that the unthinkingly obedient survivors of the Special Corps had been so cordially hated and feared. The age of the overlords, of the few exploiters and many exploited, was to be finished.

On Earth.

Harmon had seen the trend. And he had been shrewd enough to combine the possibilities of the secret Jones Drive and the Gravinol-addicted survivors of the Corps for the foundation of a new and more completely dominated empire as his domain on Earth crumbled.

On Mars.

And perhaps, some day when he had gathered sufficient power, once again on Earth.

Often around the barracks of Central Camp the Mecs had speculated on the identity of The Man, the mysterious and unapproachable top link in the chain of command. Now Nick Tinker knew the whole story.

"My God!" he said.

Susan's shoulders sagged. "We're through, and the Martians are finished too. And sooner or later he'll manage to wreck the New Governments also."

"Damn it, we're still alive!" Nick exploded. "There's still a chance."

She smiled weakly and brushed at her tears.

Twice they passed side tunnels, and at a third opening turned in at a Martian's gesture. A short passage opened into a series of three rooms.

Nick looked around. The glow-plates in the ceiling were the same as those in the abandoned surface cities, but far brighter. The first room was furnished with a single broad couch and three peculiar objects he decided were chairs. There were no shelves or cupboards, but niches had

been cut into the smooth stone walls at irregular intervals.

The second room was completely bare, giving the impression that furnishings had been recently removed.

The bluefaced Martian emitted a series of chirps, and at once the creature around Nick's shoulders pulsated, uncoiled and fell to the floor with a dull thump. Nick jumped aside in distaste as it collected itself into a flattened ball and rolled toward the doorway. There it changed shape again, flowing into a slot in the door frame.

"He says the *varlu* will kill us if we try to escape," Susan translated the Martian's chirpings.

Nick decided that if there were any other possible escape route he would not try the doorway.

"Mel nikko ne cho twa Klev?" Susan asked again.

The Martians conferred, and finally the bluish one made a gesture of reluctant assent. All three withdrew.

"Just who is this Klev?" Nick demanded. "Why did old Blueface get so bothered whenever you mentioned him?"

"He's an old, old Martian," Susan explained. "He was dying of the Plague when Dad's experiments saved him. He remained our friend even when most of the others turned against us because of the Exploiters."

"Who's Blueface?"

"That's Merlo. He has the Plague and will die soon, just as the Martian who lived here must have died recently."

"Voras? Plague? What's it all about?" Nick sank into one of the chairs, suddenly conscious of fatigue. Despite the light gravity the human body tired rapidly in the thin atmosphere of Mars.

"The Martians lived on the surface long ago, in those cities that are still there," Susan explained. "Dad studied them a long while and said they're partly like plants, but with blocked electronic and electrostatic charges in their systems that even he didn't pretend to understand.

"We learned all this bit by bit. Metals have always been scarce on Mars, so the Martians concentrated on biological engineering instead of mechanics, breeding special creatures to fit their needs. Those are *voras,* their living tools and servants and clothes and weapons. That *varlu* is just a specialized *vora.* They respond to thought waves and Martians can control them from quite some distance. Klev taught us a little about them, but human thought waves are of a different pattern and I have to actually touch them. Like that screen-vora back in the city."

"Can you—?" Nick interrupted.

SUSAN shook her head. "No. *Varlus* answer only to their owners, and even another Martian couldn't pass that one without Merlo's consent.

"Seven or eight centuries ago," she continued. "A spaceship crashed on Mars. Dad believed it came from clear outside this solar system. All the creatures inside were dead when the Martians reached the crumpled hull.

"It brought the Plague. Shortly afterward Martians began to turn blue and shrivel and die. For a while they thought water had something to do with the disease, so they developed huge water-*voras* that could tunnel through solid rock and pump water, and they drained all the surface water down into caverns deep inside the planet. But still the infection spread.

"Finally they discovered that sunlight and the Plague were connected, so they abandoned the surface cities and had their *voras* carve out this great system of tunnels. The plan worked, somewhat. Darkness stopped the spread of the disease.

"But Martians are partly plants. Without sunlight they die just as surely as though killed by the Plague. So for the last several hundred years they have barely existed in a precarious balance between the Plague and sunlight starvation.

"Nick, they're a doomed race. In the year Dad and I've been here we have seen only two Martian children."

"But Klev?"

"Yeast. Just plain yeast. I'd brought one package in the Trailblazer, for cooking. But there is no more yeast on Mars."

"About the water?" Nick asked. "How come your father didn't tell Harmon about that? Colonel Hammer had us drilling all over the planet."

"Luck," Susan replied seriously. "We didn't know where it was ourselves until after we came back from Earth, after we learned more of their language."

"But all our drilling," Nick protested. "Surely at least one—"

"Twice, at least. But each time the water-*voras* pumped it to other caves. Martians don't drink, but they saw the Exploiters shipping water clear from Earth and realized its importance. We, and they, hoped the Exploiters would eventually give up and leave. Oh, if only Dad had told Harmon that Mars was completely arid!"

Nick got up and prowled restlessly around the room.

"Are they going to starve us?" he asked petulantly. His emergency rations were in his jacket, which Merlo had kept.

"Oh, no." Susan realized she was hungry too. "There's food here."

She led him into the back room, where a series of shelves were carved into the walls. Each shelf was covered with disc-shaped, fungoid-looking growths.

"When they turn pink like this they're ready to eat," she explained.

Nick found them tasteless and unsatisfying. She saw his grimace.

"Dad and I lived on them ever since the Exploiters came," she declared.

"No wonder you're thin,' he retorted ungraciously, chewing on the pulpy mass.

It was only at his remark that she realized her face and hands were grimy and her clothing totally inadequate. She blushed.

"Don't stare at me like that!' she snapped.

Nick found the queer faucet-like arrangement in one corner.

"Water!" he said, gulping thirstily.

They both drank and washed, cleaning their skins of the powder-fine sand that could work its way into the pores and cause a tormenting rash.

"What were you and your father doing on the surface when you tried to scrag me?" he asked without rancor. He had been shot at so often in his short life that he bore no ill feelings. It was a normal incident.

"Dad was desperate. He was going to get an Exploiter's uniform and try to sneak in and steal the supply ship. But poor Dad wouldn't shoot from ambush and that Exploiter got his gun out as he died."

"Oh!" Nick was astounded and somewhat puzzled by the quixotic idealism of the scientist. A gunman with Gravinol-speeded reactions was no joke, and Nick, trained to kill in the most efficient manner possible, would have fired from ambush without hesitation.

They sat for a while, each immersed in his own thoughts. Nick tried to lay multiple plans for whatever might happen, but his thoughts grew blurred and fuzzy. He threw himself down upon the couch.

"Let's sleep," he said. "There's nothing we can do now, and we'd better be in shape when things do start popping."

"Well!" Susan gasped. He showed no intention of giving her the single bed. Evidently he had never heard of chivalry.

"Are you coming to sleep or not?" he demanded in irritation.

She considered carefully, and at last lay down as far away from him as possible. The chairs were uncomfortable and the stone floor was cold.

As she settled herself a brown roll at the foot of the couch unfolded and flowed up over them like a cover. For a moment Nick threshed, remembering the *varlu,* but when it did not squeeze or numb him he quieted.

"Another *vora?*" he asked, still uneasy.

Susan nodded.

For a minute or two he squirmed restlessly, but the *vora* was warm, with a surprising fleecy texture. Then he was sound asleep. The girl lay awake a minute longer, revising her estimate of his age as his face relaxed and lost its tense, hawklike look.

III

HE WOKE TO INSTANT ALERTness as Susan's fingers encountered the bruise his pistol had left on his ribs.

"Klev is here," she said.

He sat up, and as he did so the living blanket rolled back. Both shivered in the sudden chill.

Two Martians stood in the doorway, with Merlo in the lead. The greenish face of the other was seamed and wrinkled, and the crest atop his head was shrunken and tattered at the edges. He walked with a stoop, his movements slow and deliberate. Under his arm he carried a bundle of Earth clothing.

"Klev," Susan called. *"Tec qua hala mo."*

Klev raised one hand in greeting and spoke to Merlo. The blue-faced one answered in surly fashion and chirped to his waiting *varlu.* Klev entered.

Susan noticed Nick shivering and said something to Klev, who returned to the doorway and spoke once more to Merlo. The blue-faced Martian produced Nick's jacket with obvious reluctance.

Quickly Nick ran his hands through the pockets. The oxygen sniffer bottle, half empty now, and the kit of emergency rations were still there, but everything which could conceivably be used as a weapon had been removed. He had only the knife at his belt. He started to don the jacket, but the girl stopped him with a quick gesture.

"Rip off the insignia first," she urged.

Nick saw the point, and sat in one of the peculiar chairs cutting out the stitches while Klev and Susan talked. Merlo stayed in the hallway, beyond the *varlu,* watching and listening.

At first the Martian asked brief questions and Susan answered in his chirping, twittering language. Nick could see Klev's bulging eyes turn toward him now and then, and would have given much to understand the thoughts in that alien brain.

Without understanding a word of the conversation he knew when Susan told of her father's death by the break in her voice. Klev looked at him angrily for a moment, until she shook her head and continued her explanations.

Then Klev talked, while Susan grew more and more agitated with each sentence. Finally Nick could stand it no longer.

"What's he saying?" he interrupted.

"Oh, Nick," she said unhappily. "Representatives of all eleven of the underground cities are gathering now to plan a mass attack on the Exploiters' camp."

"But they haven't ever fought back. They can't hope to—"

"They haven't always hidden underground like rabbits," she corrected. "Once they were a proud race, and even though the Plague and lack of sunlight have left them weakened and barely alive some of that old spirit remains.

"But they haven't any proper weapons, and they'll all be killed, and that's just what the Exploiters want. And, Nick, Merlo is going to take us before the Council for trial. He's the leader of the group that wants to fight, to make one last attempt to kill all Earthmen on Mars."

"What will the Council do?"

"Klev doesn't know. They have their own special laws but he isn't sure how they will interpret them. He's against the attack."

Klev spoke again, gesturing toward Nick.

"What's he saying now?"

She translated hesitantly. "He says I shouldn't have brought you down here. He can't seem to understand that you've left the Exploiters.'

"Damn it, tell him it wasn't your idea."

"Useless. We came together."

"But the Council—"

THE prospect of being tried by a council of these alien creatures was more terrifying to Nick than any combat. In a fight one at least had a chance to influence the outcome.

"Ask the old one if there's any way to escape," he demanded. "Hell, we can't just sit here and take whatever Blueface dishes out."

She spoke softly to Klev, and the ancient Martian shook his head regretfully.

"Then we've got to wait?"

"I'm afraid so. But Klev says he will speak to the Council, and try to get others to speak for us too."

"But you, Sue. You didn't—'

"I'm an Earth woman," she sighed. "Most of them think now that all Earth people are like those Gravinol-doped killers."

Her mention of the drug brought the old craving once more into Nick's thoughts, but this time not too strongly. Resolutely he put it aside.

"Dad and I are to blame," the girl lamented. "If we'd broadcast our story when we returned to Earth instead of making a private report to that Harmon monster, all this could never have happened."

The situation looked hopeless, but Nick felt no self-pity. He had been trained as a fighter in an environment in which fighters were inevitably killed. But for

the first time since childhood he felt shame. Shame that because of him and his kind this girl had lost even her uncertain refuge.

Klev rose, patted Susan's shoulder with a long-fingered hand, and walked to the doorway where Merlo waited.

"He says he'll see if he can find anyone else to speak for us," she translated his farewell.

She took the bundle of clothing Klev had brought and went into the back room. A few minutes later he heard her sobbing and glanced through the archway. She was holding up a pair of ragged brown coveralls much too large for her slender form, the clothes her father had left behind when he made his last trip to the surface.

He grew restless under the enforced inactivity and at last moved experimentally toward the doorway. The *varlu* allowed him to approach within a few feet, and then Nick jumped back just in time to avoid a rubbery tentacle that lashed out at him. A vague hope of escape died as he realized the superhuman speed of which the creature was capable.

Sue was silent and withdrawn the rest of the day. Several times her grey eyes filled with tears, but each time she brushed them away before they overflowed.

And then the waiting ended. This time Merlo was accompanied by half a dozen other Martians who stationed themselves in the tunnel as guards. Merlo touched his *varlu*. It contracted about his hand and the Martian lifted it to his shoulders, where it flattened out and draped itself like a short cloak.

"He says we should follow him," Susan translated his chirps.

Once during their short walk Nick hesitated and looked back as though planning a break, but the ominous fluttering of half a dozen *varlus* told him escape was impossible for the present.

AN ANGRY buzzing filled the vaulted room and fully a hundred Martians turned to stare as the humans were led into the council chamber. Merlo motioned them to the center and addressed an ancient Martian who occupied a dais at the far end. The presiding Martian answered at length, as though Merlo were a person of consequence, and then Merlo launched into his speech.

He turned now and again to address various sections of the assembly, and his voice grew louder and faster as he progressed. The Earthman recognized the sharp, chopping gesture with which he emphasized his points. A gesture of killing, whether on Earth or on Mars. Merlo was demanding their death. At last he paused amid nods of approval and motioned for one side of the room to be cleared.

He waited dramatically as Martians moved out of the way. Then from a pouch at his waist he drew Nick's pistol, raised it with a clumsy motion, and fired one shot against the blank wall. The sharp bark of the propelling charge and the roar of the explosive bullet blended in a thunderous concussion. Martians leaped to their feet with cries of rage, and even Susan Jones cupped her hands over tingling ears.

Merlo waited for the uproar to subside. Then, pointing at Nick and Susan, he concluded with a threatening shout.

Immediately another Martian leaped up and began to speak, also in an angry manner.

"Damn it, you green-skinned monstrosities," Nick bellowed in English. "Leave the girl out of this! Can't you see she's been trying to help you?"

Half a hundred *varlus* stirred uneasily on Martian shoulders as the assembly stared uncomprehendingly.

Nick turned to Susan.

"Translate what I said," he snapped.

She shook her head. "No use. But where's Klev?"

Klev came through the doorway just then, hurrying as fast as his age would permit. Quietly he moved toward a vacant seat, and at once the chairs around it were empty too, Martians moving away as he advanced. They seemed to regard him with distrust, distrust and fear.

He rose and spoke, the pleading note in his voice evident even to Nick. The others had been heard in silence, but time and again Klev was interrupted by shouts of disapproval.

"He's speaking for us and at the same time warning against a mass attack on Central Camp," Susan whispered.

"They don't seem to go for his ideas," Nick commented.

At last Klev finished, and even as he sat down a dozen Martians were shouting angry protests. Merlo was foremost among them.

The presiding Martian asked a question.

Klev replied shortly and turned in his seat to watch the doorway. The excited conversation of the assembly rose from a mutter to a babble.

After a short wait another Martian hurried in and took the floor.

His address was more pantomime than speech. He raised both arms as though holding a rifle and squinted through imaginary sights. Slowly he lowered the invisible weapon and stooped as though picking up a small object from the floor.

Nick gripped Susan's arm in sudden astonishment.

"Hell," he said. "That's the one who got me outlawed by the Mecs.

The Martian made a throwing gesture and waved his arms as though warning someone to go away. Then he pointed at Nick.

"I spotted him while I was on ground patrol in the city," Nick told Susan. "Caught him on a roof. But hell, I couldn't shoot him, not while he just stood there looking helpless and sort of pitiful, with his hands hanging at his sides. He didn't even try to run. Not without Gravinol, I couldn't. I chunked a rock at him to scare him away."

"But—?"

"Standing orders for all Mecs to kill anything that moves, particularly Marties, you know. Some lieutenant with field glasses saw me deliberately let that one get away and radioed in that something was wrong. Within two minutes Colonel Hammer had the orders out to get me."

The Martian finished, and this time the reaction of the crowd did not indicate any unanimous emotion. One after another rose to his feet and commented, Susan's head turning as she tried to follow each excited outburst.

At last silence settled over the room as the Martian on the dias raised both arms for silence.

"You and the man," he spoke directly to Susan and she translated for Nick's benefit, "will not be executed. That is according to the laws of Mars.

"You will both be taken to the surface and released there. Do not return, under penalty of death."

A disguised death sentence, but as effective as though they were to be executed on the spot. Nick's hand streaked toward his knife, but before he could draw it half a dozen *varlus* had him numb and helpless. His last impression as they were led away was the smugly satisfied expression on Merlo's bluish face.

IV

IT TOOK THEIR EYES A MINUTE to adjust to the slanting afternoon sunlight into which they were thrust. The rocky backbone of the planet pierced the red sands here, and through the ages the wind-driven sand had carved the outcropping into caves and spires and overhanging ledges and gaunt pockmarked cliffs, all piled together in wildest confusion. They were left in a rough, rocky bowl deep within the outcropping, hidden from the desert by the surrounding cliffs and pinnacles.

The tunnel mouth was merely a black hole, almost indistinguishable from a multitude of shadowed cavities where sand-laden storm winds had found soft spots in the stone.

Cautiously Nick climbed the slanting wall of the bowl.

"Come here, Sue," he called.

Shading their eyes against the red glare of the wasteland they could discern the hangars and barracks of Central Camp a few miles to the south, and beyond that the hulking, dark mass of the ancient Martian city. But it was Central Camp, its buildings and landing ground and the thin metallic ribbon of the barrier, that held their attention.

"No ship," Susan said. The small rocket hangars could not possibly hide the bulk of a spacecraft.

"The supply freighter just left. Not another scheduled for eight weeks."

"What'll we do?" she asked plaintively.

Nick's answer was noncommittal. "First we get out of this sun."

"Then we stay here?" Her knowledge of the Martians was useless in this arid waste,

and she turned to him for leadership.

"What else?" he replied with a shrug. "We'd scorch on the desert even if the Mec rocket patrols didn't pick us off. Here we can last for a while at least, and hope for a break."

Darkness fell without twilight, and almost at once the air took on a penetrating chill. They found refuge in a sheltered crevice, huddling close together for warmth while the rising wind howled a dirge of desolation and the two moons of Mars cast wavering shadows. They slept fitfully and uneasily.

A PEBBLE clinked against a stone. Nick's eyes opened in the orange dawn. A silhouette that was not human moved against the luminous sky and his grip tightened on his knife as he slid noiselessly out of the crevice.

He recognized Klev just in time. Then he stared and sheathed his knife again, for the Martian presented a picture of battered dejection. His face was shapeless, one eye almost closed by a pinkish swelling, and the crest atop his head was even more tattered than before. His shoulders seemed smaller, and Nick saw they were bare. His *varlu* was gone, and the other *voras* of his clothing were shredded and damaged.

At a rising hum from the south he made frantic gestures and the old Martian stumbled toward the hidden crevice, dragging one leg as though it were partially paralyzed.

Nick saw he could never reach shelter before the patrol rocket sighted him. He leaped forward, seized the Martian in both arms and carried him bodily the few steps to the protecting nook, dropping him and throwing himself flat just as the silvery hull appeared over the rim of the bowl. Susan awakened with a startled outcry but had the presence of mind to remain motionless until the rocket had roared away.

"We'll have to watch out for them constantly," Nick warned. "They'll gun or bomb anything that moves."

"Klev, what happened to you?" Susan asked anxiously as she saw the Martian's condition.

He grimaced as he tried to sit up, his injuries not helped by Nick's necessarily rough treatment. Then he chirped a few sentences.

"Oh Klev! You shouldn't have done it," she protested in English.

"What is it?" Nick wanted to know.

"The Council voted to attack Central Camp, using their *voras* as weapons. Klev tried to warn them it would be suicide, and he and Merlo fought. Merlo is much younger, and although he has the Plague he's still strong. Then he accused Klev of treachery because he was friendly to us, and had him exiled to the surface too."

The injured, beaten Martian touched Sue's hand and chirped a few words as though in apology.

"When will they attack?" Nick asked.

"Nineteen days from now," Susan translated the Martian's answer.

"How?"

"They'll come up through the tunnels into the old city, spread out, and attack the camp at night."

Nick looked thoughtful.

"What difference does it make?" Susan asked. "They'll all be killed on the charged barrier, if the proton cannon let them get that far. They can't win."

"Maybe," was all Nick could reply.

The heat grew unbearable, and several times during the long morning they were forced to change position to remain in the shade. They moved as little as possible, saving their energy and conserving their precious body water by avoiding any exertion that would bring on sweating.

Only Klev remained in the sun, his alien body gratefully soaking up the harsh rays. Occasionally he moved, each motion bringing a half suppressed mew of pain to his lips.

"How bad?" Nick asked.

Susan shook her head.

"He says he will be all right, but that swelling Merlo's *varlu* made near his eye looks serious. His leg is badly hurt, and he's terribly old, Nick."

By midafternoon their faces were flushed and dry, and the powder-fine sand itched intolerably where it had sifted into their clothing. Susan napped, but stirred restlessly and muttered of water.

"Sue," Nick asked when she opened her eyes. "Is Klev in shape to talk sense?"

The Martian saw his glance and chirped affirmatively, then clamped his thin lips

to smother an exclamation of anguish.

"Ask him if the passage through which they brought us up connects with any of the water caverns you mentioned."

She looked at him inquiringly.

"Might as well be killed by the Martians as die of thirst. Ask him."

Sue talked to the Martian, who nodded and began to trace a complicated diagram in the sand with one finger, hesitating before adding each line as though resurrecting old and almost forgotten memories.

NICK watched a while. Then a patrol rocket whistled over heading south, and after it had passed he climbed once more to the rim of the bowl. He watched it settle inside the barrier with a flare of braking jets and a cloud of red dust. And while he watched he thought.

To go below for water was absolutely necessary, but a purely defensive action which could at best only postpone the end. And nothing had ever been won by defensive action alone. Pure defense always meant eventual defeat.

He thought some more, then scrambled hurriedly down the rocks just as Klev completed the diagram.

"Sue," he panted, still out of breath. "Those creatures bred to tunnel and pump water. Are they still alive? Is there any way to make them work? Ask him!"

Sue hesitated, not understanding.

"Can they pump water up as well as down? Ask him!" Nick barked impatiently.

Suspicion showed in the Martian's manner as Sue made the request.

"He won't answer until he knows what you're planning," she reported. "If the Exploiters found water they'd never leave."

"One of us has to get back to Earth." Nick tried to be as patient as possible. "After everything that happened during the War years you can be damned sure the New Governments would handle Harmon fast and tough—if they knew what he is doing and planning. We need a ship, but when the next supply ship comes out eight weeks from now it will be too late. We've got to get a ship out *ahead of schedule,* and only one thing will do it. Water!"

"But how can you get—?"

"I'm not sure, yet,' he admitted. "But its worth a chance. Now ask him again."

The Martian looked doubtful. For a moment his hand hovered over the chart in the sand as though to erase it.

"Give him time," Susan advised.

"It's a gamble," Nick admitted. "But the *voras—"*

"Live almost forever,' she responded. "Whether we could make them work for us—"

The sun was almost down before Klev decided, but then he chirped and clicked for a good three hours. The water caves could be reached, he said, but some of the *vora* burrows through which they must crawl were so small it would be impossible to carry him, and his own strength was insufficient. And the distance from the water caves to the surface was too great for him to reach the water-*voras* by thought alone, the usual method.

"You made the screen-*vora* work," Nick reminded Susan.

She was uncertain. "Water-*voras* are different. But I'll try."

The moon shadows were too black to permit them to study Klev's chart during the night. Klev slept, with the patience and resignation only age can bring. Once or twice Sue nodded in Nick's arms, but he remained fully awake, thinking.

In the first light of dawn Martian and Earthman studied the diagram together, but it was already hot when Nick turned his back on the original and reproduced it in another patch of sand. Klev checked it and nodded approval.

"Let's go," Nick said, starting to rise.

Klev restrained him and fumbled in the torn folds of his clothing to produce a glowing sphere the size of a marble. It seemed to be a portable form of the glow-plates with which he was familiar.

"Thanks," he said. "Take it easy until we get back—I hope."

The Martian understood the sense though not the actual words.

Then he and Susan dashed across the small expanse of sun-baked rock and squeezed into the passage.

For a while they followed the tunnel through which they had been ejected, but shortly encountered a branching passage they recognized from Klev's map. It spiraled down, narrower and steeper than

the main tunnel, and soon it too branched. Once more they took the steeper route. The air grew stagnant but cool.

Most of the way they were forced to stoop or crawl, and three times they encountered sections so constricted that they had to stretch out flat and inch tortuously along. Little by little the air grew humid.

At last they came to an almost level passage where they could walk erect, rounded a turn, and their greenish light no longer was reflected by enclosing walls.

"Nick," Sue whispered. Her voice reverberated hollowly, dying away in distant echoes that seemed incredibly loud. Nick paused with hand on knife to see if they had been overheard.

Finally they tiptoed out along a sloping shelf of rock, out into the great cavern. And then the light shielded in Nick's hand gleamed on a sheet of black, still water. At once both were on their knees, scooping up the precious liquid in their hands, drinking their fill.

Satisfied, Nick placed his lips to her ear. "Where are the *voras?*" he breathed.

She pointed to the water.

TOGETHER they piled their clothing on the ledge, hooding the light with Nick's shirt so that only a faint glimmer showed. Then they waded out into the chill, unfathomable blackness of the underground lake, holding hands to steady each other. Nick's scalp was tingling and with every step he half expected his bare feet to encounter something soft and *alive.*

The water deepened rapidly and soon they had to swim. Nick had never had the opportunity to become an expert, so although he tried to be quiet his arms made small splashing sounds as he raised and lowered them, sounds that echoed sibilantly throughout the gigantic chamber. Sue swam close, invisible in the darkness, and he flinched momentarily as a current of water from her hand felt like something living brushing his side. She grasped his hands, pulling his arms through the motions of a breast stroke that would not require lifting them above the surface. He touched her to show he understood.

After that they swam more quietly, keeping together by the faint sounds of each other's breathing and an occasional touch of hands.

Every few minutes they stopped and floated motionless, listening and feeling with every fiber of their bodies.

Sue felt it first, a tiny, almost unnoticeable pulsation in the black water. She touched Nick's wrist, indicating a direction, and swam a few more strokes. The pulsation grew stronger. Nick felt it too, and only an effort of will kept him from threshing away as tingles of terror oozed along his spine. He felt very naked and helpless and vulnerable as he floated.

Again Sue swam a few strokes and stopped. For a full minute she lay quietly, allowing her breathing to ease. Then there was a faint splash as she dived, and it seemed to Nick as though hours passed while he waited alone in the darkness.

"Psst!" he hissed softly at the sound of her head breaking surface. She rested a while, dived again, and when she came up this time the pulsations were appreciably stronger.

Something below turned and moved uneasily, questioningly, disturbed in its long slumber by their presence.

A third time Susan dived. Nick waited, counting seconds. She did not come up. He waited. And still she did not come up. Panic began to grip him.

He floundered into a clumsy dive and swam downward through the inky fluid. His ears hummed and his chest began to burn, but his groping hands encountered nothing. At last he fought his way dizzily to the surface.

She was just calling him the second time as his head broke water and he gulped a lungful of air.

"Nick!" The word was roaring from the rocks as she heard his splash and indrawn breath.

"I touched it, Nick! I had to go deep," she panted as she swam toward him. "I think it got my thoughts, just what you told me."

Deep in the black lake something huge and unguessably powerful heaved and stirred, creating wavelets that raced toward shore and filled the cavern with insane, reechoing laughter as they broke against the rocks.

Racing now, without any attempt at silence, Nick and Susan swam toward the reassuring green pinpoint of light that marked the shelving ledge.

The waves were rising, lapping almost to their clothing, as they waded ashore. Without pausing to dry themselves they dressed and dashed up the tunnel.

Halfway to the surface they paused to rest, sitting on the cold, curving floor.

"What was it like?" Nick asked.

In the greenish light he could see her shudder.

"I—I really don't know," she confessed. "It was huge and it had no real shape, but some parts were hard and some weren't."

"Will it do what we want?"

"I—I think so. It was so *different* that I couldn't understand all its reactions."

It was night when they edged out through the narrow opening, but Klev was awake and watching. His jaw dropped in astonishment as Sue told of their journey, of how she had actually touched the water-*vora*.

"Martians can't swim, Nick," she explained.

"How soon?" he wanted to know.

"An hour or two," she said after conferring with Klev. "But he's not sure. This has never happened before in all the history of Mars."

After a while Nick crept up to the rim of the rocky bowl, shivering as the cold, sand-laden wind whipped his exposed face. Both moons were below the horizon, leaving the desert in darkness relieved only by the stars and the lights of Central Camp.

Phobos rose rapidly in the west, throwing long, distorted shadows over the red sands. And as the shadows grew shorter Nick thought he detected something. He rested his eyes and looked again. Yes, it was there, a darker, glimmering patch in a low spot a mile or so to the east.

"Sue," he called excitedly. "It's starting."

Quickly she was beside him, looking where he pointed.

The patch of wet sand and standing water had grown to several hundred yards across when the orange flare of one of the night patrols flashed up from Central Camp. From several miles away the pilot sighted the unusual patch in the desert and swung to investigate.

"Duck!" Nick warned as a flare blossomed into a circle of blinding whiteness.

THREE times the rocket dived and circled the growing lake, and when it left as the last flare died it returned to the field at full throttle. Nick could imagine the pilot's almost incoherent radio reports. Water on Mars! A lake in the desert!

The number of lights in Central Camp doubled while they watched. A gate in the barrier opened and three huge half-tracks roared out with searchlights glaring. They reached the pond, and even from the distance of their hiding place Susan and Nick could see the tiny figures of men as they rushed to the shore, touching the water, kneeling to dip their arms in it, even raising it to their lips.

The green star of Earth rose over the horizon, and then the thing for which Nick had been hoping actually happened.

All the lights of Central Camp went dim as power connections were changed. And then the flare of the great subatomic space beacon began to wink a message, the great beacon that depleted the power resources of the camp so badly that it was to be used only for messages of extreme urgency. But this was urgent indeed. Water on Mars! An hour, two, the coded news flamed into space.

Nick and Susan crept down the slope, bone-chilled from their swindswept watch, to tell the injured Martian what had happened.

"If that doesn't bring a special ship out, then nothing will," Nick exulted.

At dawn a procession of armored cars began to flow between the camp and the lake, and just before noon several hastily improvised tank trucks appeared, loaded and returned. No patrol rockets went out, for it seemed the entire schedule of the camp had been disrupted.

Shortly after noon the lake ceased growing and began to dwindle. Slowly at first, then with increasing rapidity the water vanished into the sand. There was confusion in Central Camp and at the shores of the pool.

By midafternoon it was gone, leaving only an expanse of mud that dried and cracked under the glaring sun.

Klev twittered anxiously at this latest development.

"He says the Martians have discovered what we did, and set the *vora* to pumping the water away again," Susan translated.

"No matter. The ship is on the way by now."

As evening approached Nick wedged a large boulder firmly into the mouth of the tunnel, placed his back against it and announced his intention of sleeping there.

"At least we'll know if they come after us," he said.

Klev nodded approval.

But the Martians made no attempt at reprisal for the humans' interference, as they were too busy preparing their attack on the camp.

Next morning truckloads of drilling equipment rolled out from camp, and soon a dozen rigs were boring through the sand and underlying rock. Floodlights were erected and the drilling went on day and night.

But the space beacon did not flame again with the news that the water had vanished. Power was too precious.

Nick counted the days as he doled out the water from the canteens they had refilled in the underground lake. His concentrated emergency rations, shared with Susan and Klev, gave out at last. The Martian did not drink, but finally the last trickle of water went down Susan's throat and the period of torture began.

Nick slept during the torrid days now, panting and itching and thirst-tormented beneath an overhanging rock, and through the nights lay on the edge of the bowl watching the sky. They did not talk much, for the effort hurt their parched throats.

It seemed a vision born of wishful thinking when at last the distinctive fan-shaped trail of a spaceship showed against the stars, dim at first but steadily growing brighter. And then it was in the upper atmosphere, the scream of the braking jets rising and falling as the pilot jockeyed the throttles. Down it came in a flaming arc, to land amid the beckoning lights of Central Camp.

"What do we do now?" Susan asked.

"Steal it."

"But how?"

Nick shook his head wearily. "Wait for the Martians to attack. Then try to break through."

"But the barrier? We'll be killed too, just like the Martians."

He looked at her sharply.

"I'm going with you, of course."

V

WITH FULL DAYLIGHT THREE half-tracks moved out from beside the grounded spacer to the site of the drilling operations. They paused while a group of men got out to inspect the dry holes and the line of stakes that had been placed to indicate the margins of the vanished lake. Then the cars moved on, scouting the surrounding desert.

The three wheeled together and headed straight for the outcropping, while Nick and Susan crouched low to keep their heads below the skyline. They came on and on until Nick began to have an uneasy suspicion they had been spotted, but at last they turned aside.

"Nick!" Susan's voice was vibrant with hatred. "That man in the turret of the center car is Gerald Harmon himself!"

Nick shielded his eyes and tried to study the tiny figure in the plastic dome, but the distance was too great to distinguish details. He cursed fluently and wished for any sort of power weapon, understanding now why the spaceship had seemed larger and sleeker than the usual freighters. The overlord of the Martian Exploitation Company had come to investigate in person, bringing his own personal cruiser.

Nick tried to rest, falling at last into an uneasy sleep disturbed by dreams of rippling streams and drenching rainstorms. He slept until the rays of the sinking sun crept under the ledge to bring him back to the realization of his arid, deadly surroundings.

But somewhere amid his dreams an idea had been born.

"You can handle a spacer, can't you?" he asked.

"Certainly. You don't think Dad handled the *Trailblazer* alone?"

"Good. There may be a chance for you then. I don't like that blue-faced Merlo at all, but we have to play along with him. And this thing is bigger than any of us as individuals."

"You've seen how the camp is built in a hollow to protect it from the wind?"

"Yes, but—"

"They never thought of floods."

Susan's eyes gleamed as she sensed his idea.

"You mean if the Martians made their water-*voras*—?"

"A dozen *voras* and a dozen water caves. The barrier would short out and the Martians could get in. There'd be hell's very own confusion and no lights. You might make it."

"And you?"

"Merlo is a bluefaced, pigheaded, tradition-bound fool, and no general. He'd just beat his men's lives out against the charged barrier without thinking of the only weapon he has that's worth a damn. I'm going down and tell him, right now. The attack is tomorrow night."

Susan's grey eyes searched his face.

"Aren't you a bit confused?" she asked mildly.

"How?" He was annoyed at her implied criticism.

"You are a fighter. I'm not. I speak Martian. You don't."

"They'd kill you, Sue! I can't let—"

"Then tell me, in Martian, just what you'd say to Merlo!"

"But—"

She threw his own words back at him. "This thing is bigger than any one of us. I'm going."

Reluctantly he agreed that her words made sense.

"All right," he sighed. "Tell Klev."

The Martian broke into twittering, remonstrating speech as Susan explained, pointing at himself. Slowly and painfully he climbed to his feet and took a few uncertain steps. But then his injured leg collapsed and he crawled ignominiously back.

"That leaves it to me," Susan declared. "Roll that boulder out of the way."

The old Martian, shamed by his own weakness, sat with shoulders slumped and face hidden in his hands as Susan prepared to leave.

She came to Nick and in an unexpected move threw her arms around him and pulled his face down. For a moment he held her close, their sun-parched, cracked lips clinging together.

"It could have been so lovely," she whispered as she broke away.

She was crying openly as she squeezed into the tunnel. Nick's fingernails dug into his palms as he stared after her, but there was nothing he could do.

The day was long, and without Susan beside him the night was even colder than the others. Once he woke and found his arms reaching out as though to touch her. But the following day, the last lonely day of waiting, was the worst and longest. Once he tested the point of his knife against his thumb. If the plan worked at all, he resolved, he would look for Merlo in the camp even before going after the spaceship. At least there would be revenge.

From time to time Klev looked up from where he lay in the blinding sunlight. There was sympathy on his greenish, distorted face, and although Earthman and Martian had no common language he seemed to understand the depth of Nick's feelings. And Nick in turn pitied this aged Martian who was dying an exile from his own race.

As the shadows lengthened Nick made his few preparations. Strips of cloth from his jacket made a harness to hold the nosepiece of the tiny oxygen bottle, still half full, against his face. No matter what happened he wouldn't need the jacket again. A piece of empty ration tin formed a clip that would hold the button valve open.

DARKNESS came and Nick rose. Klev chirped softly and extended his hand Earth fashion. Nick took it briefly, then turned away and clambered down from the outcropping into the desert.

The lights of Central Camp guided him as he set out. Deliberately he held a slow pace that would not tire him unduly, but his heart was pounding. This was the pay-off.

Everything was normal as Nick drew near. Groups of men moved about under the floodlights. The revolving searchlights atop the guard towers swept remorselessly around the circle of the barrier, occasionally striking the two half-tracks that held secondary patrol inside the charged fence. The ports of the big spaceship squatting on the launching grounds were dark, its polished hull reflecting the unwinking stars.

He was still a quarter mile from the barrier when the first excited yell reached him on the wind. One of the floodlights winked out. Nick quickened his stride as the noise from the camp increased. The

lights showed a darkening patch that stretched from the launching grounds into the barracks area.

The barrier sparked as though some living creature had come into contact with it, and an alert sentry scoured that area with machine gun lead. Again the barrier sparked, hot blue and green stars shooting up in a great fountain.

And then Nick could see the water itself. He ran on toward the northwest border where the terrain was lowest, trying to keep his mind on the desperate business ahead. His spirits lifted slightly as he realized that Susan had reached Merlo. But what had happened to her then? She had still defied the Council.

His feet struck wet sand, then shallow, murky water while he was still a hundred yards from the barrier. He waded on as the water deepened.

Only a few scattered lights still gleamed as he stopped to adjust his improvised diving mask. Evidently the water was reaching the central power plant, but flares arched upward at irregular intervals to shatter the night. During the intervals of brightness Nick froze to immobility.

The gunners in the guard towers were firing at shadows. But no explosive bullets, for which Nick was especially glad as a stream of lead whipped the water nearby. There was a standing order forbidding the use of explosive shells where they might damage the barrier wires.

So far the firing was desultory, bursts coming only when the barrier sparked as the water deepened. Evidently the commander still considered the flood merely a freak of nature.

All at once there was no more ground beneath his feet. Nick began to swim.

A yell of alarm that changed to a shriek of agony cut the air, coming from the southern border of camp. Another. The firing grew suddenly intense, lines of red and yellow tracer whipping out from the towers. A flare exploded overhead to disclose a shadow like a giant bat that swooped heavily across the barrier and fell upon a Mec just inside. The man's automatic rifle roared a futile, unaimed burst as he died. The Martians themselves Nick could not see.

Dazzled by the intermittent glare, he almost swam into the barrier without seeing it. Only the barrier itself saved him as the rising water engulfed another wire and the lethal current popped and sparked. With a heave of his shoulders he swung aside and glanced up. Ten or twelve feet of the fence's thirty foot height still projected above the surface.

He floated, tightening his mask until the nosepiece dug into his face. Then he pushed the clip down over the valve, and as the life-giving gas hissed out closed his eyes and let himself sink into the silt-filled, inky water.

Bubbles spurted around the edge of the mask and roared upward past his ears, but he found that by inhaling slowly he could breathe. His feet touched bottom and his legs sank in almost to the knees. The fine, dusty sand of Mars that had lain arid for so many centuries had changed to clinging, sticky mud. He pulled himself free and swam forward anxiously along the bottom.

One outstretched hand found the barrier. He felt the prick of the hooked, knife-edged barbs as they sank through the cloth with which he had wrapped his hands. He advanced the other more cautiously. Here below the surface the killing current of the barrier was dead, shorted away by the dirty water.

He drew himself downward, hand over hand along the closely spaced wires, down to where the barrier met the ground. He probed at the mud, holding himself in place with one hand. Wires. And at full arm's depth in the mud, still wires. He hooked his feet into the fence and dug with both hands, flinging the gooey muck aside in great, swirling gobs until the water grew thick and viscid around him. More strands of wire. He dug more frantically, hanging head down in the hole he had made. And then his clawing fingers encountered the solid rock into which the steel supports of the barrier were anchored. It was impossible to dig under that.

A trickle of muddy water seeped into the mask, stinging the lining of his nose and making him want to sneeze. With an effort he extracted himself from the sticky burrow and clung to the ground level strands until the spasm passed. The hissing tone of the compressed oxygen was perceptibly lower.

GENTLY he grasped one strand with both cloth-wrapped hands, spreading his fingers in an attempt to avoid the barbs. But this was no ordinary barbed wire and the spacing of the evilly sharp, machine-finished prongs was such that one still pressed against each palm. His heavy boots protected his feet as he braced them against the adjoining strand.

He brought his powerful back and leg muscles into play, ignoring the pain that lanced through his hands. The wires gave a fraction of an inch. He pulled again. The wires had been four inches apart; now they were almost six. At the third pull he could feel the barb in his left hand touch bone with a grating rasp, but the wires stretched still further. Again and again he tugged, resting only when he grew dizzy with pain.

And then the oxygen was gone. He had just time to gulp in one last lungful as the hissing died and the bubbles around his face stopped. Once more he heaved at the wires, using every ounce of power his body could muster.

Then, holding his breath, he rolled sideways into the gap he had created. The slackened wires sagged down and the cruel barbs bit into his chest and back and legs.

He winced at the pain as he tore his hands loose from the deeply embedded prongs, then pulled the wires away from his chest and rolled his body further into the opening. The points dug into his chest again while he moved one leg and then the other.

When he knew he could hold his breath only a few seconds more he broke clear with a lurch that left bleeding furrows across his body and floated dizzily toward the surface. One hand whipped the useless, empty oxygen bottle from his face.

He sucked in the thin air of Mars with harsh, rasping, grateful breaths as he broke surface, glancing around to restore his sense of direction. He was inside the barrier.

Seven of the armored cars were lined up along the southern boundary of the camp, the focusing coils on the muzzles of their proton cannon glowing red from continual firing, their powerful lights picking out targets for the gunners. As Nick swam on, one of the cars tried to move forward and struck a soft spot in the muddy ground. Its light waved wildly, then went out as the car overturned and rolled into the water.

High above the dark water the hull of the spaceship glowed in the starlight. Nick headed straight toward it, sometimes swimming, sometimes floundering through deep, sticky mud that sucked tenaciously at his feet. Even in the darkness and confusion he knew his way, for Central Camp had been his home for many months.

As suddenly as it had appeared the water began to recede, draining into the ground. Nick understood. The barrier had been breached, and Martians were not able to swim. The heavy combat vehicles of the Exploiters were bogged down in the mud, but from the sounds of firing Nick knew that a good many Mecs had gained the safety of the high, unflooded guard towers. With daylight the surviving Martians would be forced to retreat.

There were still many deep pools of water about, and a layer of slippery silt over everything, when his route took him close to the administration building. He edged quietly around the corner just as a wet, bedraggled figure floundered through the mire to the doorway. The figure, outlined for an instant, was human enough, but to Nick it seemed somehow *wrong*. Quickly his mind placed the discrepancy. The man wore a coat instead of the short uniform jacket of the Mec.

Mud sucked noisily at Nick's boots as he followed, but the sound was drowned in a renewed burst of gunfire. Nick smiled grimly as his killer training awoke again under the influence of familiar surroundings.

Harmon was halfway up the stairs, sure of his own safety and pausing to wipe some of the mud from his face, when Nick's knife point penetrated the overlord's expensive suit and jabbed at his back.

"Don't move!" Nick snapped.

VI

HARMON JERKED AND HALF turned, but stopped as the knife prodded harder. Nick's free hand swept around the older, heavier man and snatched his pistol from its holster. He could feel the raised inlay on the frame as he grasped

it. Gold or platinum, he'd be willing to bet, but the gun was no toy. With a practiced hand he thumbed off the safety and slid it into his belt, feeling renewed confidence at being properly armed again.

"On up!" he hissed, his knife jabbing viciously, as the sucking footsteps and muttered cursing of several men sounded close outside.

In the upper hallway a small battery lamp showed Harmon's pasty face and slack jaw. He managed to turn his head far enough for one glance at the muddy, blood-streaked apparition behind him.

"Who are you?" he quavered. "You can't do—"

Swift as a striking snake Nick's opened hand flashed out. The overlord's head rocked at the impact.

"Shut up!" Nick's voice was low and deadly and his captured gun covered the stairway. But the footsteps outside went on past.

"Do you want—" Harmon began, one hand reaching toward his coat pocket.

Nick saw the movement starting. Harmon uttered a squeal of pain as the heavy gun barrel chopped down with bone-crushing force. He moaned and clutched his injured hand while Nick returned the gun to his belt and dipped into the overlord's pocket.

He whistled under his breath as he saw the small metal box, and a feeling of uneasy longing swept through him. Day and night that box had remained on a small table in the lower hallway, presided over by an orderly who opened it to anyone who asked. The Gravinol was given freely to any Mec, but its method of distribution was a clever psychological trick to emphasize the dependence of each individual upon the Martian Exploitation Company.

Automatically he dropped it inside his tattered shirt.

"To your ship, Harmon. Get moving!"

"But you can't—"

"I said move!"

The overlord gasped, more from the indignity than from pain, as Nick's water-soaked boot met his trousers.

"I am The Man!" he tried to bluster.

"I know." Nick's answer was coldly venomous.

It was sheer bad luck that brought Colonel Hammer around the corner of the building just as Nick prodded his captive out into the sea of mud, and more bad luck that the camp's commander was nervously fingering a night gun.

Nick felt the gun's light beam fall upon him, saw the red sighting spot, and felt a stunning tug at his shoulder just as he threw himself flat. Then Harmon's pistol rocked in his hand and Hammer's body vanished in a shower of coruscating orange sparks.

Groggily Nick pushed himself to a sitting position. He tried to move his arm and found it limp. His right hand explored the injury. It seemed to be a flesh wound.

Harmon! The ship! All at once he recalled his mission. The overlord had vanished in the darkness and there was no time to look for him. The ship came first. His hand moved from the box of Gravinol to his pistol.

THE shining hull lay in a depression blasted into the dry sand by its own landing jets. Water glistened darkly around it now, and against the gleaming metal the open entry port was a circle of blackness. Nick's legs were heavy with clinging mud and weakness as he waded into the pool, and only the knowledge that it was now or never kept him in motion.

His eyes slitted and the gun came up as he glimpsed movement in the water. There it was again, a flash of white with something darker beside it.

"Nick!" a voice screamed. "Don't shoot!"

The cry was too late to stop his trigger finger, but he managed to raise the gun so that the bullet whined off into the darkness.

"Nick!" she screamed again. "It's me!"

Some of the heaviness left his legs as he struggled toward her, and his bullet-torn shoulder and gashed hands no longer seemed to pain so acutely.

But what was that darker shadow beside her? His gun came up again.

"Who's there?" he demanded. The water that was only chest deep on him was neck deep on her, but he could see that she was supporting her companion.

"It's Merlo," she panted.

Nick's lips drew back in a snarl.

"No, Nick! Don't!" she gasped.

THE MARTIAN gained a footing and stood motionless, his head bowed. Nick noticed that one long arm was holding a small package carefully above water.

"Don't kill him!" Sue urged again. "He saved me once tonight."

Doubtfully Nick lowered his gun.

The Martian looked up and twittered briefly.

"He says thank you for his life, and that he was a fool," Susan translated. Nick ignored him.

"Come on," he said impatiently.

The water grew shallower as they plodded toward the ship, until it was only a thin layer over the deep mud.

"What's Blueface got in that package?" Nick asked, still suspiciously keeping the Martian ahead of him.

"Yeast," she answered. "We found some when we raided the kitchen building. Klev was with us then—Merlo had two Martians carry him—he wanted to come."

The kitchen building was on the edge of camp where the fighting had been heaviest. He glanced at her and saw a heavy regulation gun belt dark against her bare white skin. That belt had not been a gift.

"Bad?" he asked.

She nodded silently.

"What happened to Klev?"

During those tortured days of waiting Nick had developed a strange liking for the ancient, uncomplaining Martian.

"A half-track caught us. We had to scatter, and lost Klev in the darkness."

"He's probably been killed by now. No time to look." Nick felt a sense of shame as he said this. But it was true. The ship came first.

He glanced apprehensively to where the rim of one of the moons was peeping over the horizon. Then they were in the shadow of the hull, struggling through the mud beneath its outcurving surface toward the portable metal stairway leading to the port. The stairway was tilted to one side where its wheels had sunk deep into the soft mud, and the steps were slippery with slime. Nick started up, holding his gun ready.

Suddenly a mocking laugh came from the entry port above. "Stay where you are!" a voice said.

"Harmon!" Sue gasped.

The nozzle of a bulky flame gun appeared over the edge, followed by a head. The nozzle swung downward as they clung helpless on the slippery stairway. On the ground below Merlo made some involuntary motion and the weapon swung to include him in its range.

"Any last words?" Harmon mocked.

Susan said something, using extremely nasty words that Nick had never expected to hear from her lips.

"Such a sweet child," Harmon gloated. "And such a pity to break up your tender scene."

Susan kept staring up, and suddenly her arm tightened convulsively around Nick's waist.

Then she was screaming, screaming and sobbing and crying at the top of her lungs.

"Please, please, Mr. Harmon!" she begged. "Don't kill me! I'll tell you everything, all about the water! Only don't shoot me, please!"

Harmon leaned further out the port.

Nick was actually nauseated with disgust.

"Don't!" he snapped at her. "For Pete's sake don't give him that satisfaction!'

Susan ignored him.

"Please, Mr. Harmon! I'm too young to die! I'll tell you everything! Just get me away from this man!"

Harmon's shoulders appeared as he leaned out.

"Tell me now," he ordered. "Where is the—"

His sentence ended in a bellow of terror as a dark shape catapulted down along the polished curve of the hull. Long arms clutched Harmon's beefy neck in a death grip. For a moment two figures struggled and wrestled furiously on the rim of the port.

Then Harmon lost his grip and they fell, missing the tilted stairway by inches. Harmon emitted one choked wail as he whirled through the air with the dark figure still clutching his throat. Mud spattered as they struck, and in a last effort Harmon tripped the trigger of his weapon.

A sheet of flame billowed out, followed by a spreading cloud of steam tinged with the stench of charred flesh. The two hu-

mans clung to the stairway, sickened and gasping for breath.

"Nick, oh Nick!" Susan choked out. "He must have climbed up over the tail fins."

"Who?" Nick was still half stunned.

"Klev." Susan was crying. "It was Klev. I had to hold Harmon's attention and give him a chance."

Nick shook his head to clear it and once more started up the stairway on hands and knees.

A searchlight came on in one of the towers, swept erratically across the camp, flickered across them, moved back and stopped. Nick tried to rush the last few steps, knowing that bullets would follow the light, but his injured arm gave no support.

THEN, amazingly, the beam shifted. He looked down. Merlo had gotten up from where the detonation of the flame gun had tossed him. Still carrying his package of yeast he was splashing through the mud, running with no effort at caution. The searchlight operator, in doubt, followed the moving target.

Seconds seemed like hours and inches like miles, but at last with Susan pushing him from behind Nick tumbled into the airlock. Susan Jones scrambled across his body.

Together they swung against the heavy circular door, and it was then they had their last sight of Merlo.

The Martian paused directly in the light, shifted the small, precious package to one armpit, and clawed hastily at his living clothing.

"My gun!" Nick said. "The one he took from me below."

Merlo fired clumsily and the blue flare of the bullet was low on the guard tower, but the light wavered and swung away for an instant. It swung back, but the Martian had vanished in the darkness. Then it traversed once more to bathe the closing port in its glare. A stream of bullets clanged and clattered against the steel as they wrenched the locking lugs into place.

Nick staggered to the control chair. Automatically his hand reached for the converter switches and found them on. The converters were already warmed, as though Harmon had been planning a solo getaway in case the battle went badly for his forces. Still only half realizing that it was the similarity to the fighter rockets of the War days that made the spaceship controls seem so familiar, Nick opened the fuel feeds to the main tubes and his hand hovered over the ignitor key.

"Ready?" he asked.

Susan threw herself into the acceleration cushions.

"Blast it!" she urged. "Quick, before they turn a proton cannon on us!"

Nick's finger hit the key and the world went black.

His stomach was twisting in the agonies of acceleration cramps. His shoulder thumped and throbbed, and the gashes the barbs of the barrier had left on his body felt like lines of fire. Some sharp cornered object was wedged between his side and the seat belt, poking at his bruised ribs. Clumsily, his one usable hand lacerated in his struggle with the barrier, he fished it out. His hand failed to grasp it properly and the box of Gravinol slipped through his fingers and fell to the floor.

He stared down at it, and there was longing in his look. In that little box was relief from pain. But other things too were in that box. Slavery, for instance.

He looked a long time, then slowly shook his head.

"Ease off the throttles," Susan spoke. "We're out."

He did so, aiming the cross-hairs at the green star of Earth and coupling in the gyros.

"It'll be hell back there without Gravinol," he reflected aloud. "You'll never know how bad it can be."

Susan brought out the first aid kit and gently wiped the dirt and clotted blood from his wounded shoulder as he slumped in the pilot's seat.

"A few will survive and be cured. The strong ones," she reminded him.

"Ouch! That hurts!" he protested, and sat up suddenly as antiseptic stung in the wound.

"You did, dear," she replied with feminine irrelevance.

Ilon's mind reeled. He felt resistance crumbling.

Girl of the Silver Sphere

By J. Harvey Haggard

Beautiful, impossibly savage, Prince Ilon loved her madly. For her he would almost dare the blackest secret of the cosmos. Almost—but not quite . . .

A SILVER SPHERE SWAM IN vague depths. The surrounding frame of intricate mechanism gave off a soft phosphorescence that strengthened and faded by turns. A young man, robed in gossamer *vitri* of richest hue, leaned over, watching keenly.

His fingers moved controls at the bottom of the machine. The silver sphere leaped upward in the vision plate, swelling like a balloon. Continents and seas were now visible. Then one area swelled over the visor-plate. Gradually a small spot became a city, a strange sprawling city. He found a certain street, a certain house, a certain room.

She was walking around on the floor of the room, dressed in the scant costume of the period of that silver sphere. She never left the floor. Her body was singularly graceful, her face angelic. Strangely, it seemed, she had no control over gravity, and was forced to *walk* or be *conveyed* across the surface of her planet.

"Oh beautiful, primitive girl!" he whispered chokingly, gripping his fingers tight on the control board before him. "Savage girl of lost ages!"

The girl smiled. She seemed to turn directly toward him, and her blue eyes were filled with a dreamy, half-yearning promise, as if she had heard his words and had answered.

Yet she had never seen him. She didn't even know he existed. She couldn't even imagine the wonders of flashing through interstellar worlds by use of thought-force, nor picture a means of existing entirely on basic radiation, sucked from the atoms themselves. This young man, slender and well-proportioned, was a product of endless evolution and progression. She was a retrograde current of atavism that had persisted somehow on one outlaw world.

Savage, yes! But there was no mistaking the light in Ilon Karth's eyes as he followed every movement of her little graceful body.

Suddenly an awareness of someone approaching burst into his mentality. He wheeled, an expression of annoyance on his face. With an abrupt movement of his hand he struck a switch that caused the glowing of the machine to die. The sphere, and the lovely girl of that alien globe, vanished utterly.

NOW the surrounding walls, glowing with light of their own, flickered. An ovoid opening in solidity appeared, forced by the mental-push of the approaching person. The figure of an old man, venerable of appearance, stooped and robed in the gold-mesh-cloth of the Galax-Mentor, floated into the room. The wisdom of ages lay imprinted on the face that was like wrinkled parchment beneath the blue emerald set in a forehead band, denoting his rank in the Supreme Council of Seven. The face lost its strain of menta-portation, and the old man landed gently at his side.

"Greeting, Ilon," greeted Nyo Karth, his eyes darting intellingently about the room.

"Er—Greeting, dad," said Ilon Karth, hiding his irritation. As the opening had been menta-forced into the room, his hand had darted instinctively toward a hidden compartment in the machine. Now he tried to hide the movement of his hand and what it contained as it sped toward the secret pocket again. But the keen eyes of his father saw and grew narrow and steely with surprise and suspicion. The older man reached out and grabbed his wrist. In Ilon's open palm lay a needle-ray weapon of defense.

"What is it you fear, son?" he demanded sternly. "What can you, a princeling of your own people, fear here in our own galaxy?"

Ilon Karth averted his eyes. "Has enough tonnage of *ithilyn* been removed from the mines lately?" he asked, ignoring the other's question.

"But there is only one thing to fear," continued his father wonderingly. "That is the minion spies. The guards of the secret galaxy. But what have you done to fear them? Don't tell me, Ilon, that you have been crazy enough to probe through the dark ultra-universes in search for lower life-forms?"

"Look, father," said Ilon, indicating the machines. "I perform my assigned tasks here. Those only. I supervise the *ithilyn* mines, watching their daily output through the scanner."

Suddenly a greenish glowing swam through the open air, like the rays of a fairy elfin, settling around the room.

The older man gasped. "It's the spy-rays of the minions, son! Whatever you've been doing, son, blank your mind as I do. When they're gone, we'll go into this foolish thing you've been doing."

So they stood at the scanner and inspected the scenes of the lower *ithilyn* mines. As Ilons hands moved the controls, various scenes shifted before them. In the headquarters room, other men such as himself raised their heads, smiled and saluted, or answered direct personal questions.

They came to the digging scenes. Huge giants toiled in a deep hole, like larval bodies in cocoons. Rest-time had come. Food had been shuttled in on a chain of grav-belts. Now the great fingerless hand of the giant reached down, felt around expertly, and picked up the food shuttles. The great eye in his forehead did not waver, for the giant was blind. Yet the hand, misformed now into a digging claw, threw the food expertly into the huge, gaping maw and the jaws began to chew with animal-like gusto.

Then the elfin glowing was gone. Nyo Karth spun accusingly upon his son.

"Ilon—my son, my son," he cried in a softly troubled thought tone. "Have you forgotten, boy, that after all you have a father? And a friend? Have you forgotten the person to whom you took all your troubles to as a lad?"

Ilon Karth frowned, still averting his eyes. "But I'm a man now, father, faced with the problems of a man of the upper Galax."

"True, true, son, but—"

"And if the conventions of an age-old universal society bore me to death, father, then it's—"

"Oh!" cried the older man understandingly, and a smile tugged at his mouth, which relaxed somewhat. "Then it does not please you that the Hygiene Board has decreed a marriage union be officially recorded in a few short star-periods to—"

"It's not that I hate Nyrilla," burst out Ilon. "Not that she isn't as attractive as all women of Corallinth. It's simply that I don't have anything to say about it. There's no demand for agreement from either party. It just happens that her gene-patterns match up and supplement mine. Our children would be benefited by the mating. At a given time, some official moves a hand across a sheet. Two names are written down and whether or no—it's happened. Besides, I don't *love* Nyrilla. Don't you understand, father?"

"You don't—" began the older man, and suddenly his astonishment melted into a sunshine of laughter. "Love—eh—you say, boy? Love."

HE repeated the word softly, as if testing the sound and depth of a meaning almost forgotten. "Yes, I remember the term now. So it's that." Then a growing concern replaced his merriment. "But that's a thing of bygone ages, son. You *are* having a trend. Why not take it to a psych-treater, son? Have it removed from your mind. You'd be surprised what a beautiful and understanding girl Nyrilla of Coralinth is, once—"

"Psych-treater! Psych-treater! That's all you hear! If you have something that bothers you, you forget it in a psych-treater! If you have an original thought that tantalizes you—go to a psych-treater! Is that sensible, father, to forget the problems that may affect the entire future of your life? Besides, the girl of the silver sphere—"

The words had leaped out impatiently. Now Ilon stopped suddenly, clasping his hand to his temple from where the mental words had burst. But too late. Old Nyo was looking intently at him and then was moving toward him with sudden wrath on his high brow, his hand upraised as if to strike him.

Ilon ducked, fearing the blow, but his eyes did not leave the angrily pulsing blood vessels that throbbed on his father's forehead.

"Fool!" spat out Nyo Karth in horrified anger. "Then you have been breaking the laws of the Mentors. Plumbing the universe, seeking contact with life in lesser forms. Don't you realize the gravity of this offense? Don't you realize you may lose your princeship, be banished from the Galax, or even executed?"

Ilon recoiled. "But, father, you wouldn't reveal—"

"Reveal!" exploded Nyo Karth angrily. "Reveal! Yes, that's what I will do. I will take it to the council. You are as insane as the poor blind mastodons who work like maggots in the mines, whose eyes would be blasted by a mere ray of the very light for which they were originally intended. I will demand this madness be erased from your brain. I will demand punishment, as your misdemeanor calls for. I will show them that I stand for justice, even to a son."

Suddenly he paused. Again a strange glowing of spy-rays pulsed through the room. And then a furious clangor sounded from without. A mental-wave beat through the barrier.

"Open up! Open up!" It demanded in strident mental tones. "In the name of the Council of Seven!"

Ilon felt beaten. His father leaped toward him. His eyes blazed into his own, and a command leaped out.

"Resist them! Resist them!"

"But father—"

"Resist them, fool, before they open a way into the room. After all, I can't turn you over to them!"

"But father—if they should discover you, a Galax-Mentor—"

Then a wave of relief swept Ilon. Gladly he built up a mental force that was thrust around them like a shell. He felt it weaving a network of resistance, felt it clash with outer forces demanding entrance. The outer mental cries weakened and vanished momentarily. It would not be for long, Ilon knew. The spies, realizing something was amiss, would go for help. When they returned, the bombardment would be strengthened to the point where resistance would be futile.

"Quick!" commanded old Nyo. "Get the silver sphere, Ilon."

Ilon grasped his father's arm for an instant, saying nothing. Mental gratitude flowed from his being into old Nyo's. His father shook him off impatiently.

"The girl!" he spoke again hurriedly. "No time to waste."

"Then you'll take me to her!

"More than that, son! I'll break all the laws of the Galax. I'll bring *her* here to you."

"But I can't allow that!" cried Ilon, aghast. "I can't allow you—"

BUT to disobey the order in the older man's eyes was impossible. Again he manipulated the machine deftly. Again the pulsation of light swam from the depths, and the silver sphere emerged, swinging upward. Again he found the city, the room—and again the beautiful savage moved in its depths, humming a song on corraline lips that made Ilon's head swim. Even to look at her made his heart thump and race madly.

Nyo looked, noting the symmetrical trim of a supple body, the barbarian grace of her. He nodded in reluctant approval.

"They'll be back, Ilon," he said. "You'll have to stand them off while I work. Think you can do it?"

Ilon nodded grimly. Nyo had withdrawn from his robe a tiny cylindrical object that was like a rod of sheer light. He held the filament before him. Now he looked directly at the girl's image, distant across star-worlds, and his eyes narrowed to mere slits. The muscles of his body knotted with exertion. Lambent light leaped from the white sliver in his hand, darted like lightning to his temple, splayed out again toward the distant barbarian world.

Inside the room—the spy-ray danced.

It leaped and throbbed, a living thing, moving quickly here and there. and Ilon built up his desperate force of mental resistance. He felt an outer demand for entrance, but denied it. Then overwhelming power blossomed from all sides, cascading down upon him.

It was a white heat applied to his brain fibre, a furnace of unknown forces fanned to utmost intensity. His mind reeled from the impact. Shock raced through his being. He shuddered, feeling the forces breaking into the barrier of the room. Hopelessness against greater powers overwhelmed him.

The sight of old Nyo, kneeling now, brought a vibration of despair from Ilon's inner being. If they discovered his father, the Galax-Mentor, breaking the law . . .

Energy came back out of nothingness. Again he flung himself into the struggle with forces interlocked in the etherical strains of matter. For a long moment he tensed, denying them any thought entrance. And he held! He held! And the lightning forces that had leaped from Nyo's brain across the universe were creating a white nimbus entirely around the girl—the girl of the silver sphere.

And suddenly—

Suddenly she was no longer in that distant barbaric world. She was here—standing before them. No longer light-years away, but swung across a space-warp created by the mind pulsations of old Nyo.

And as abruptly—

Crimson lips lost their curve of happiness. A scream burst from her lips and went shuddering through the air. Her eyes opened — but blindly. Unseeingly. Her hands reached up to clutch at—blindness!

One moment—of utter fantastic horror. One moment when her body swayed and fell and writhed and twisted in unutterable pain. One moment when her beauty was crushed by a sledge-hammer of unspeakable anguish.

And as suddenly she was gone. As suddenly, she was back again in the room of the distant world, and the silver sphere was hurtling back into the remote depths.

Ilon's mind reeled. He felt resistance crumbling. The solid barriers of the room were melting. He staggered. Solidity vanished. Figures—grim and demanding—leaped in. He was helpless before them.

But old Nyo's mind flashed out, indignant and hot.

"What is this!" his father was thundering. "Spies intruding upon a Galax-Mentor! What would you have?"

ILON saw the suddenly startled faces of the many spies, saw their bewilderment, their wonder and fear. They retreated hurriedly, sheepishly. In a moment the room was whole again. Ilon felt stunned.

Memory of the girl's unseeing pain crushed him. His father's arm was about his shoulders now.

"Come, Ilon," said Nyo. "The variable-star Necktor has changed three times. Another moment, and your union with Nyrilla will have been recorded. You must go to meet her. It is the time-old custom of the Galax."

"But the girl, father, the girl of the silver sphere . . ."

"I disobeyed the laws of the Galax, son, and brought her here for an instant, so that you might understand. Our race of beings is a glorious race, son. It has come across vast universes, across unthinkable aeons of time, and across unmeasurable dimensions of space. Somewhere along the paths, seeds have been lost, and life remained in retrograde places—like this little planet you have just witnessed.

"This silver sphere has floated forever in several surrounding seas of—force—shall we say, son. Gravity—atmosphere—and several other energies of which we will not speak.

"But several faculties—such as we know them—menta-portation, radiance-life—are impossible under the layers of atmospheric molecules. Though the power for menta-portation lies dormant in their bodies, as in our own, their atmosphere prevented its use.

"So—as the mastodons in the mines are blind because they have not seen light—so are the people of the silver sphere without true powers of the mind, because they have never been able to use them.

"When I transported her here, the sudden comprehension of these powers would have killed her in another instant. So I sent her back, Ilon, back to her own true world. Have I done rightly, son? Will you go now to Nyrilla?"

Ilon reached out for the strength of his father's arm. Memory of the girl, her pliant erectness, her sheer beauty, was like a racing livid fire in his mind.

He would have to forget her—and go on loving her. He would have to leave her unnamed, unknown, a savage creature in her own primitive world. And though her memory never quite went from his mind, well, that was something to be faced. For her own sake he would never dare again to think of bridging the space that separated them.

"Let us go, father," he said.

Softly their bodies arose. As lightly as feathers they floated through an opening in the barrier that came at their mere wishing . . .

CHERYL RAMSDEN, torch singer for the *Midnight Club,* screamed just once in her apartment. They found her prostrate and writhing, as though from the after-effects of a seizure.

"Nerves!" the physician pronounced it. "Better take it easy, girl!"

"Look, doc,' cried Cheryl. "I ain't going nuts, am I? For an instant it was like swimming through space. Suddenly it was like being inside a flame, with every part of me going up in ashes and . . ."

The doctor looked very serious, as if he felt the surge of forces that had swept her up. Then he shrugged his shoulders as though to say some things were better to be left unnamed and guessed at.

"That's what comes of too much torch singing," he said lightly, and being young and not immune to beauty, he smiled encouragingly and with depth. "Maybe you've been burning the torch at both ends, Cheryl."

"What would you suggest, Doctor—"

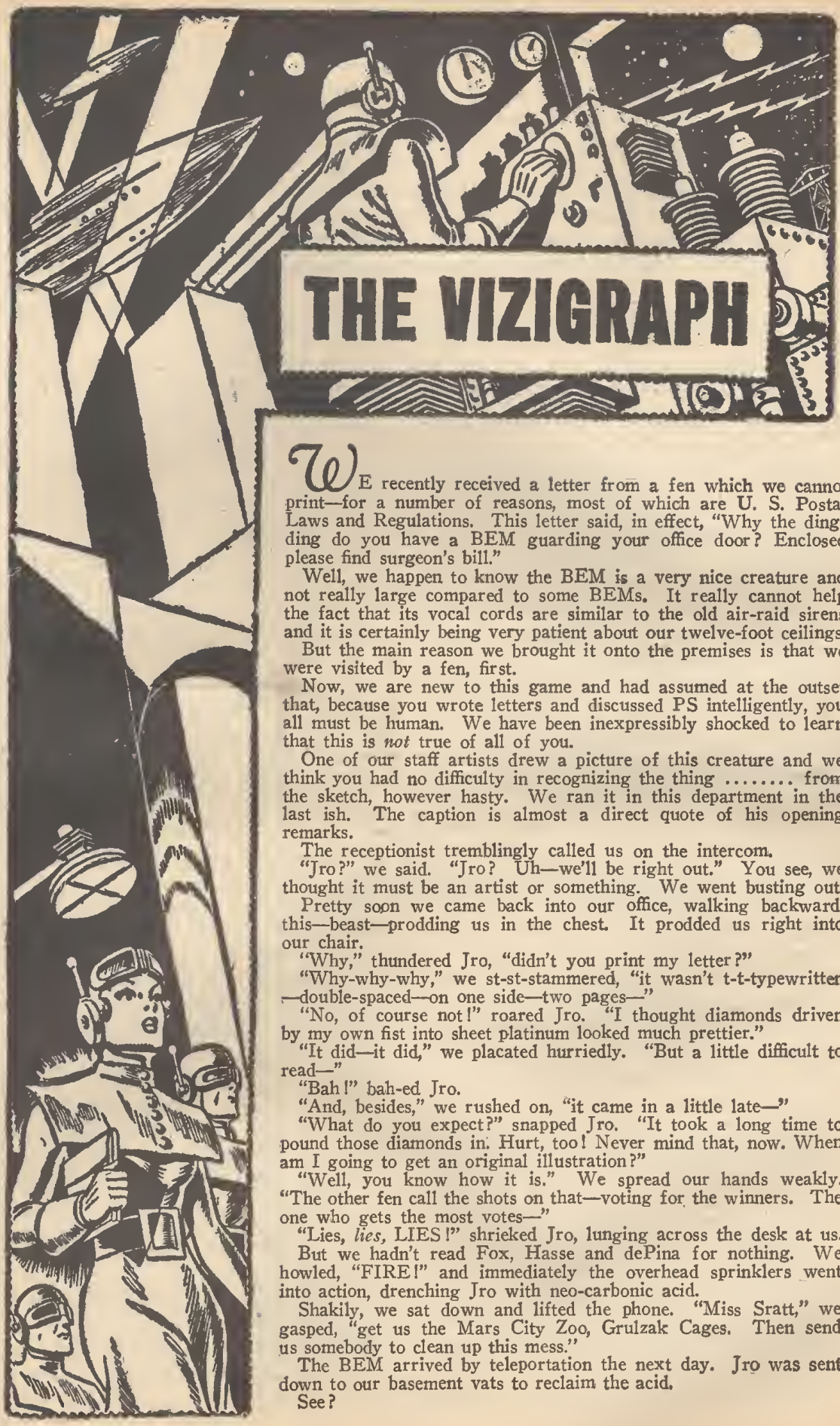
"Mudd! Phineas Axelton Mudd!—milady!"

"How horrible! Did your parents actually tack that onto you or was it invented to torture your patients?"

"A little of both, but I'd recommend a long drive into the country, maybe a swim at the seashore—"

"In the company of a young doctor, redhaired, by the name of Mudd?"

"Well, I didn't say that, Cheryl, but could be, gal, could be."



THE VIZIGRAPH

WE recently received a letter from a fen which we cannot print—for a number of reasons, most of which are U. S. Postal Laws and Regulations. This letter said, in effect, "Why the ding-ding do you have a BEM guarding your office door? Enclosed please find surgeon's bill."

Well, we happen to know the BEM is a very nice creature and not really large compared to some BEMs. It really cannot help the fact that its vocal cords are similar to the old air-raid sirens and it is certainly being very patient about our twelve-foot ceilings.

But the main reason we brought it onto the premises is that we were visited by a fen, first.

Now, we are new to this game and had assumed at the outset that, because you wrote letters and discussed PS intelligently, you all must be human. We have been inexpressibly shocked to learn that this is *not* true of all of you.

One of our staff artists drew a picture of this creature and we think you had no difficulty in recognizing the thing ..... from the sketch, however hasty. We ran it in this department in the last ish. The caption is almost a direct quote of his opening remarks.

The receptionist tremblingly called us on the intercom.

"Jro?" we said. "Jro? Uh—we'll be right out." You see, we thought it must be an artist or something. We went busting out.

Pretty soon we came back into our office, walking backward, this—beast—prodding us in the chest. It prodded us right into our chair.

"Why," thundered Jro, "didn't you print my letter?"

"Why-why-why," we st-st-stammered, "it wasn't t-t-typewritten—double-spaced—on one side—two pages—"

"No, of course not!" roared Jro. "I thought diamonds driven by my own fist into sheet platinum looked much prettier."

"It did—it did," we placated hurriedly. "But a little difficult to read—"

"Bah!" bah-ed Jro.

"And, besides," we rushed on, "it came in a little late—"

"What do you expect?" snapped Jro. "It took a long time to pound those diamonds in. Hurt, too! Never mind that, now. When am I going to get an original illustration?"

"Well, you know how it is." We spread our hands weakly. "The other fen call the shots on that—voting for the winners. The one who gets the most votes—"

"Lies, *lies*, LIES!" shrieked Jro, lunging across the desk at us.

But we hadn't read Fox, Hasse and dePina for nothing. We howled, "FIRE!" and immediately the overhead sprinklers went into action, drenching Jro with neo-carbonic acid.

Shakily, we sat down and lifted the phone. "Miss Sratt," we gasped, "get us the Mars City Zoo, Grulzak Cages. Then send us somebody to clean up this mess."

The BEM arrived by teleportation the next day. Jro was sent down to our basement vats to reclaim the acid.

See?

Gang, Erik Fennel begged for the illustrations for BENEATH THE RED WORLD'S CRUST and we sent them to him. Do you mind? Awfully? Ah, stop that sniveling!

Gardner wins first and picks one. JoKe comes second and picks two. Oberfield gets third and picks three. For new readers, let us say that this means each one gets only one pic, but this system prevents duplication of requests.

—PLP

* * * * *

(We present first a letter which somehow appealed to us and, we think, will do the same to you. Here, for our dough, is a lad you should all write to. How's for deluging old 14929947 with ink? On the ball, gang!)

2nd Batt. Somerset L. I. Band,
Att 1st Batt Somerset L. I.,
India Command.

DEAR SIR:

I managed to get hold of one or two of your PLANET STORY books, and I think they were very good indeed. I only wish I could get more, for they are much better than our English idea of that sort of thing. Our books are called Astounding and I must say they are very poor. There are not many boys in England who like that sort of thing, so the book stalls don't bother much about getting them in at all, but out here in India we get a lot of stuff from the U. S. A. and that has made it a bit easier for me to get your books.

The boys in the band I am in think that I am quite mad reading your books, but I just say they have no imagination. Still, I find it very hard to get anyone to talk to on this subject—but if you could find someone who would care to exchange correspondence with me—you know the sort of thing, a pen friend, one of your readers in the States would be very nice. Anyway, please give it your attention, if it is not asking too much of you.

When I get back home in England and then out of the Army, I hope to come out to America, and then if I like it stay out there. I shall be able to get your PLANET STORIES every quarter, too. Still, I am looking into the future again.

I'm afraid I must close now, must hurry to catch the rocket mail. It's only once a day out here on this asteroid. So will say cheerio for now, hoping to hear from someone new soon.

Yours truly,

Bandsman 14929947 KEITH PEARS

DON'T RUN—FALL . . .

82 Westminster Drive, N.E.
Atlanta 5, Georgia

DEAR EDITOR:

Isn't it about time to wean your staff of authors away from their toy-balloon and hot-air ascents into the heavens and introduce them to atomic-powered space-ships which are going to act altogether different from those I read about in the pages of PLANET STORIES?

There is, first of all, the problem of taking off from the earth. The most economical direction is straight up, but even so the reduction in mass ratio required for lifting a few tons of space-vehicle into the stratosphere is enormously out of proportion to the amount required for long-distance flights after they break free of the earth's atmosphere. A continuing discharge of

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fuel means a continuing increase in the velocity of the ships, so that a terminal velocity bordering on the speed of light is theoretically possible.

But unless they intend going beyond the orbit of Pluto the ship will not require such speed. Human anatomy places a limit upon the rate of acceleration, and there is no apparent reason for burning precious stores of fuel in order to attain a velocity which will have to be reduced by the expenditure of additional fuel in order to decelerate for a safe landing. Wouldn't it be better to simply accelerate up to that point which would enable the ship to "coast" into the orbit of the planet upon which the landing is proposed?

In taking off from the earth the ship should be directed to the moon and just enough fuel discharged to propel it beyond the earth's gravitational field. The ship would then "fall" toward the moon with an increasing velocity, and by cutting the motors back on for a few seconds the ship could be projected on past the moon and toward the next nearest planet. By thus hopping from one celestial body to another the ship would conserve most of its fuel supply and provide additional room for cargo and passengers.

From the standpoint of economy, the larger ships should be assembled on the moon because of its lower gravity. These could then be assigned to regular orbits which would *never* land upon a planet, but would take up a "free-falling" position just outside the planet's stratosphere while loading and unloading was handled by short-run "stratoliners." It sounds all wrong, but the large ships would only require small motors while the small ships for transfer would require large motors. The large ships could draw most of their energy requirements by "falling" toward the sun in the manner of comets.

If you will check the Einstein equation ($E=Mc^2$) you will find that it also says that Energy divided by Mass is equal to the square of the velocity of light. The velocity of light is a constant. The sum of the Energy in the universe is a constant. The sum of the Mass of the universe is a constant. When you add these three constants together, you have the explanation for most of the problems dealing with motion.

If you don't believe it, ask Einstein. I'm pretty busy at the moment overhauling my rods and reels—maybe I can catch that big fish that got away from me last year?

Sincerely,
ROBERT A. BRADLEY

SNEARY CASTS HIS SPELL

2962 Santa Ana St.,
South Gate, Calif.

PLANET'S LORDLY PLUTOCRAT:

Aaaaah Summer, ain't it wonderful. Summer PLANET, that is. Or is it? Oh well, the cover is nice. AND IT MATCHES THE STORY. Why what *will* you think of next? *Ho! You wouldn't dare!!!* But really, the guy (Anderson, isn't it? *Yes—Ed.*) is sure good.

As for inside art . . . you gave us a lot of names. Nothing outstanding, yet . . . but they will do. Vestal seems about the best.

As for stories, the shorties walked away with top honors again, *Little Pets of Arkkhan* being the best. It was so much better—well *acted* is the only word—than the others. It has always been interesting to me how these mind entries we read about would work. We know that it is possible for people to read thoughts, so we assume that some could or can read minds. But could anyone or anything ever send out such strong thoughts they would smother another's will-power? It seems unlikely, yet we don't know what we may find in space. Stories like these always sort of give me creeps.

Quest on Phoebe was darn good. I liked the O'Henryish ending. *Mo-Sanshon* was good, too. I knew it all along. Neet twist on the old, old bugs-indanger-earth plot.

The Martian Circe. Oh foo, well written, but why not let the poor Martians win once? Taint fair I say. In only one story that I have read have the Martians come out ahead.

The Venus Evil, more or less so-so. I suppose he got the idea from the stories of black butterflies in South America. Them bestes are even worse than Geier's. For as the story goes they seem to work with a kine of vine. An explorer reported finding a number of vines that had seemingly captured a Pluma and the body was covered with these black butterflies. And he reported they were eating it. The natives wouldn't go near them. "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio—"

Vassals of the Lode-Star—Fox and his smart-savage again. It is like hearing the cast of one radio program acting on another. Fox is a good writer, but I sort of wish he would use a new theme. Even a new hero. How about a space murder-mystery?

The viz seems a little short. Ahh, well. Though I can't see why he would want it, give first prize to Dr. Thomas Gardner. You may point to him with pride, P old LP. At least one reader of yours has brains. Don't blush, Doc.) There is just nothing I can add to what he has said. Only I hope you print some more stories that will cause him to write.

Second to Dan Wilhite. Veery neet. Though I doubt if sace miners will look much like our coal miners. Unless they live in city-domes or something, they will be tech-men. They will be engineers and scientists. Though they proble wont act like Earth men in the same post. The thought of a sour-dough type miner hopping around in a battered space-can is silly.

Third, Telis Streiff. Good boy there. Sort of confozing, but amoozing. And beside he voted for me. (Ok, Telis??)

I don't think Meade's letter was so bad. Though I do resent the crack about gibbering. I do it only at night. And if he wants Einstein let him write it. As a starter, he might explain the cerved universe to me. Dr. E. says you can go in a straight line and come back where you started. I understand this on a 2-dimensional plane. But three gets me. And which way would you bend as you were warped back. Up, down, or side-ways. It would seem there should be a law governing this. Huh, Meade? Oh yes, tell Guerry Brown I have a dictionary, there. What I need is a secretary. Any one want the job???

Yours *Fan*rendly,
RICK SNEARY

MORE SECRET MESSAGES

548 North Dellrose,
Wichita 6, Kansas

DEAR PUZZLING LOPSIDED PSYCHO:

Maybe if I wait just a *little* longer it'll happen! It might, ya kno . . . well, I'll wait only a bit and, if it doesn't do it, I'll tell that Payne

off . . . NO! IT DIDN'T . . . Payne, you're a fake! I've waited for three hours hoping to see that Norse hatchet hit the Black Priest, and it just won't do it . . . whatcha gonna do about it? (referring to the cover, natchurly). Gad!

After E. A. McKinley's wonderful explanation as to how he got his last copy of PLANET, I feel compelled to do the same (don't push me!). Ya see, it goes like this: "Hey mom!—mail come yet?" "Yes, but I left it over at the restaurant." "What did I get, huh?" "Oh, a letter and a magazine" . . . so I went in and flopped myself down on my bed . . . "hmmmmmmm" (I thot) "she sed it was a magazine . . . I wonder if she meant *fanzine*." So I got up and went into the living room . . . "Mom, was it a fanzine or a prozine?" "Prozine." "Oh" . . . so I went in and dropped lightly to the bed again. "Hmmmmmm" (I thot). "It could only be PLANET or (competitor of yourn). And since it isn't the right time of the month for (censored), then it must be PLANET . . . but, then again—I kno!!! I bounded off the bed and into the living room again. "Hey, mom, was it in a big envelope or a small one?" "Large one, dear" . . . "uh huh . . . swot I thot . . . It's PLANET alrite." (Which, considering the circumstances was a very brilliant deduction.) After finally getting the thing, the "grisly thing" in my mits, I tore off the brown paper (and the back cover) and took a look at my prize . . . "Yowse" I screamed and staggered to the divan . . . upon which I fell heavily . . . oops, too late! Fergot divan was being recovered, after pulling myself out of the springs I got around to la viz . . . and after reading my letter ten times I decided to leave it for the time being and come back to it later.

Now for the stories, etc. *Vassals of the Lode-Star* was a direct copy of *The Dark World* by Henry Kuttner in one of your competitor's mags (*Should we read them?—Ed.*) . . . maybe Fox is just another pen name of Kuttner (*No—Ed.*) . . . gad, wot a thot . . . hmmm, must ponder into that. Therefore I will not comment on it. *Moon of Danger*: Way low for De Pina . . . way low. *The Martian Circe* . . . could have been better, I suppose, but it was still good treatment of a bad plot. *Mo-Sanshon!* . . . nice . . . only punch line wasn't so hot . . . red ant, green ant . . . who cares? *The Venus Evil* . . . ugh that was gruesome—but *good.* More! *The Little Pets of Arkkhan* . . . . best story in this issue. *Quest on Phoebe,* second best in plot . . . fifth in writing. Shud have been a novel. Didn't Napoli used to draw for Argosy and Blue Book? (*Dunne—Ed.*) The pic on 2-3 was fair . . . one on 23 stank; 32—good . . . who? (*Sharp—Ed.*) 46—ugh . . . the girl isn't even human . . . Vestal is good for mob scenes though; 68—ohhhh, who? (*Sharp—Ed.*) 75—good; 86—good; 87—no! Not Kiemle . . . 94-95 . . . looks like the balcony scene from *Dread Flame of M'Tonak.* Now La Viz to go and only a half a page left . . . can I make it? Oh. In *The Martian Circe,* the author happened to note that Roal was thankful that he was not bothered by claustrophobia. *That got me!* Since I do have afore sed phobia the following description about pushed me off the edge . . . I actually had to lay the mag down and await about ten minues before I could read on!

Skirvin: I agree with your last three paragrafs. Oberfield . . . I never wooda thot it

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. . . one more fan . . . *gone!* Kennedy: not as snappy as usual. Carter: Well, I *guess* he's human. Wilhite: I see you've been reading *The Robe.* Sigler: Really nifty . . . he's about the only one left that can tell ya off without sounding like Snedecker. Norton: Sit down! Fall on your knees! Sneary *is* a genius. Sneary: Yes. . . . Anderson is good. Brown: Oh come, Guerry, what mag has a better letter column? . . . (besides: blank, blank, blank, blank, blank, blank and blank?) why, PLANET, natch. McKinley . . . ta da! first place . . . for friendship if nothing else. Grimard: whole cloth?- But not all of it was cloth, *if* you look at it again. Meade: Cocked trypers at 20 paces? Widgodsky I take it he doesn't like you. Gardner . . . second place . . . oh fine . . . who shall I give third place to? Not PLP for sure! . . . hmmm, give it to Sigler. And why all the psycho stories this time . . . did the "little things" get you? Thassal for now . . .

Telisincerely,

TELIS STREIFF

WE'RE A NICE GUY, BUT—

520 Highland Ave.,
Ottawa, Ont.

DEAR EDITOR:

You sound like a nice guy, but you have a lot to live up to. Under the editorship of Wilbur S. Peacock PLANET attained a standard so high that few STF mags have equaled it. Chester S. Whitehorn was a swell editor and a great guy who walked into most fans' hearts and will stay there. Under your editorship there have been a few changes in PLANET—some of them seem good, others bad. I wonder if you realize that the generation of kids who would ordinarily start becoming readers of your mag will find it prohibited by their parents because of the sex on your covers, interior illustrations (and now even some of the stories)? I doubt that the sex attracts many regular readers as stfans generally become stfans for different reasons and it is definitely driving away readers both young and old.

You sound like a nice guy, but you have a lot to live up to.

In case you think that the above criticism will make one bit of difference as to whether I buy the mag or not, the answer is no. Any real stfan will buy any STF mag as long as it publishes one good story per ish.

You always publish far more than one good story every time, so the criticism is not to be considered condemnation but just a plea.

Here's the way I see the Summer stories:

The Little Pets of Arkkhan. . . . This is the best story Vaseleos Garson has ever printed. It is one of the best PLANET has ever printed. It is one of the best any STF mag has printed. It is one of the best stories of any type that I have ever read. I shall never forget it. Perhaps it is rather symbolical that Kent Knight's desperate, hopeless fight with. It was far more gripping than the mass-battles and one-man-against-an-army-slaughterings in some of your other stories.

Mo-Sanshon! . . . One of the brilliant new authors that the previously-mentioned Chester Whitehorne brought to the eyes of all was a near-genius named Bryce Walton. In *Mo-Sanshon!* Bryce Walton has written you one of his finest yet. Only *Prisoner of the Brain-Mistress* in the Summer '46 PLANET is its equal. There is a lot of thought in this.

The Martian Circe . . . Raymond F. Jones can certainly write! His stories live for the reader. I thought *The Toymaker* was the only one of his recent stories to top this one.

Quest on Phoebe . . . James R. Adams has the faculty of telling a story in a simple, direct, straightforward manner, all the while building up to his climax and never letting the reader lose interest.

Vassals of the Lode-Star . . . This story suffered from two things. First, it seemed to be hastily written as if Fox was trying to meet a deadline for a story and didn't have enough ideas prepared. Also, there was some rather awkward and even amateurish writing which we don't expect from an author of his caliber. Secondly, the story suffers from the almost crude attempts to inject sex and slaughter into an otherwise gripping story. But Fox is Fox and so it was a fine story despite everything. I shall remember the Discoverer long after the gal with the "generous red mouth et al" has been forgotten. As a matter of fact I had forgotten her name already and had to look it up!

The Venus Evil . . . A calmly written little gem.

Moon of Danger . . . I don't know when I've been as disappointed in a story before. And to think this was written by Albert de Pina! The same who wrote *Keeper of the Deathless Sleep!* This is hack. I don't care if de Pina did write it! The scenes in the spore-fields with Ric Martin slaughtering hundreds of Phobians . . . the hackneyed ideas. . . Are you sure de Pina wrote this? (*He hasn't sued us for using his name yet —Ed.*)

P. S.'s Feature Flash was very good with two of my favorites, Gardner F. Fox and Raymond F. Jones, writing very pleasant columns.

The Viz was the Viz and I love it that way! You *do* have the best letter department in STF. First place goes to Thomas F. Gardner because he expressed my sentiments about Rocket Summer and its implications perfectly—except that I couldn't have expressed them the way he did. Second place is occupied by Bob Norton for a nice original letter with none of the nastiness others in the issue had. Third to Joe Kennedy, one of fandom's greatest letter writers. He always has real humor in his letters *and* some real thoughts, too. That's what his imitators forget.

Yours stfly,

R. R. ANGER

FROM OUR FAVORITE HAIR SHIRT

1028 N. Broadway,
Wichita 5, Kansas

DEAR EDITOR:

Well, the latest issue of PLANET was about the same as usual. Readable but hardly thought-provoking. I would like to suggest to Albert de Pina that he read an encyclopedia rather thoroughly before he lays another story on Phobos, the larger moon of Mars. He will find that its diameter is only ten miles instead of the over three hundred that he had it in his story. Incidentally, half of three hundred is one hundred and fifty instead of three hundred, as he put the distance between the center of Phobos and the inner surface. Just what had Mr. De Pina been drinking before he put his yarn on paper? I strongly suspect it wasn't water.

There is another thing I would like to mention. An author may have any situation he wishes but all action should be a logical con-

tinuation of the basic plot. In the lead novel, when that house came through the space-warp, those characters just get up and walk out of the place and forget about it. In actuality they would have used the house for a base of operations or ransack the house for weapons and supplies as well as durable clothing. I can't see a full grown chicken in full possession of her senses starting on a cross country hike in silken trousers. That may suit the drooling-mouthed guys, but it isn't what would really occur.

Note to Chester S. Geier: Automatics do not use tungsten-steel bullets. They use bullets of solid lead with a jacket of a harder metal, such as copper or a cupro-nickel alloy.

I disagree with Mr. Gardner that opening up other worlds would solve the over-population problem of Asia. The over-population comes not from lack of land but from inherent weakness in the Asiatic peoples themselves. The natives of India prefer squalor and dirt to making anything of themselves and if they get any money the tendency is to bury it instead of making it work for them. They could solve their own problems if they wanted to but are too shiftless to do anything. If the planets are conquered they would not migrate and if force were used the result would probably be a holy war that would make the atrocities of which Hitler was accused seem like an afternoon with Little Lord Fauntleroy. There is only one race in all Asia that has the ambition to build and colonize like the Anglo-Saxon. That is the Japanese and we are trying to hold them down now. (*We wonder why?—Ed.*)

The planets will first be reached by adventurous explorers from the white races. Then will come people to exploit the material resources and with them will come missionaries to work for Christianity. After them will come the permanent settlers who are tired of governmental interference. For a time these colonies will be ruled from Earth but after several generations they will be strong enough to compel Earth to recognize them as independent nations. But the majority will be American and European, not Asiatic.

Respectfully yours,

EDMIN SIGLER

OUR MASTER'S VERSE!

865—20th Ave. So.,
St. Petersburg 6, Fla.

DEAR LINGERING PSYCHOSIS:

Well, I see PLANET has come out again,
Mid cheers from all the admiring fen,
So here's my comments on the latest ish
The cover babe was quite a dish!
I see the Eternal Three are back!
Well, they're not welcomed by *this* letterhack.
But enough of this; let's turn to the tales:
Fox's yarn was good. He never fails.
Although a bit hackish, now and then
Vassals of the Lode Star should suit the fen.
I was a bit disappointed in de Pina
Most of his yarns are really . . . er . . . *fina,*
But *Moon* seemed to lack that special touch
That made the *Silver Plague* so good, as such.
Martian Circe, a short story by Jones
Sent o glow of contentment through my bones.
Quest on Phoebe was really delicious
The satire exceeded my furthest wishes!
The rest of the shorts were rather sad.

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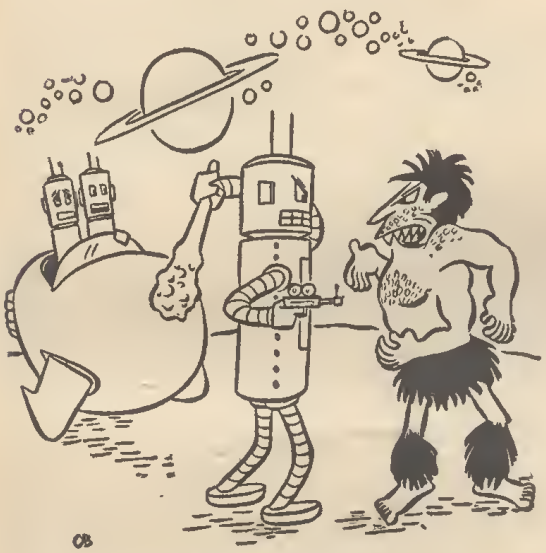
But *Little Pets of Arkkhan* wasn't bad.
Say, your artwork is really getting good;
PLANET's beginning to look like it should,
With Vestal, Napoli, Kiemle and all—
Good ole PLANET's getting on the ball!
(And say, Payne, speaking of excellent pics,
The ones on page 2 and 75 are pips.)
Now the good ole Vizigraph let us scan:
Oberfield, Skirvin, and that Wheaton man
Should get the originals, I would say;
So send 'em their way, sir, without delay.
Well, now that I've set poetry back fifty years
I'll take my leave, before I bore you to tears . . .

Sincerely yours,

LLN CARTER



"He's got nerves of steel!"

WANTS US TO USE POLISH

501 East Lincoln,
Wellington, Kansas

DEAR EDITOR:

Please don't let that green gremlin with the battered blade chop the pretty miss in two. If you'll just have him hold that pose for a moment while I rev up my pogo-stick and check mags, I'll come to the rescue.

Please, take no offense, but this ish ain't up to par.

If I may make a suggestion, shorten your subtitle squibs and don't give so much of the story away in them. At present they are definitely detrimental to the stories appearing under them.

Vassals of the Lode Star, I find after considerable mental mathematics, gets first of the rather mediocre lot. Then comes *Martian Circe*—neat plotting, but too little real polish on it.

Who said pulp fiction doesn't need polish?

FEATURE FLASH and VIZIGRAPH take all the honors this time. Except, you printed my letter. After reading it over forty-two times I read the rest of the magazine.

About the best illo in the mag was the cartoon that somehow found its way into the Viz. If I get a choice of your original art, gimme either the cover or that cartoon.

Vestal is my choice for your best artist. Get him to simplify his drawings, leave out some of the mob scenes, and buggy-eyed phobiacs and you got something.

I wasn't going to vote on the Vizi this time, since you say it won't work to vote three times for myself. But T. Streiff is holding a blaster against the back of my neck, so I guess I will have to vote him a first choice. (*First due to TS's possible sex we've had!—Ed.*)

Joe Kennedy, as always, gets in there and last —harrumph—third, Lin Carter.

Give Edwin Sigler, with all due respect, a long lusty luscious—and very damp—bronx cheer. His reference to mathematics is like a hillbilly telling Einstein all about rabbits multiplying.

Dear Siggy, they don't build highways in space. Suggest you study some astronomy and learn about planetary velocities and other minor considerations before you ad lib any more lip.

Oh, yes, about that pogostick, which you term as being applied *novia via* (yeh, my Latin stinks, too). It was actually a present to me from the Order of Schultz, the highest degree of Martianism, for my work in the conquest of Norval 136, etc. (See History of Universe, Parks and Streiff.) (*Hey, what goes on here?—Ed.*)

Being powered by thought waves and fully adaptive to any situation I have found innumerable uses for it. Once when I was spacewrecked on the third moon of a planet (so far away the star it revolves around hasn't been discovered yet) I used it as a lathe to turn out the hull of a sixty-foot inertialess cruiser and at the same time a central fire control system with which to hold at bay the fierce BEMs that were attempting to capture my mind.

Burp, durn that Martian Varnish, it repeats. Good night, dear PLP.

Constructive nightmares,

E. A. MCKINLEY

FROM A FRIEND

Boone, North Carolina
Post Office Box 608,

DEAR EDITOR:

Your magazine is getting worse instead of better. This is the worst issue I have ever got. Also why don't you get a bi-monthly PLANET? Don't you know there a war over?

Vassals of the Lode Star takes first place. *Mo-Sanshon!* takes second. As for the others, *The Martian Circe* was the best. The others weren't so good. The covers are getting better, but they still have a long way to go. The best pic was on p. 94-95. On the cover, why was the BEM part red and part green? (*Dunno—you'll have to ask him.—Ed.*)

Cordially yours,

ROY R. WOOD

LOVES THE MORONS

6310 Madison Rd.
Cincinnati 27, Ohio

DEAR EDITOR:

Clean your glasses,
Lend an ear,
Get off your posteriors,
Clements is here.

With the above bit of drivel, Clements makes his long awaited debut to La Vizi. (Oh frabjus day! Calloo, callay" he chortled in his joy.)

And Celements being a man of convention, shall proceed to tell you all about the stories.

Fox's yarn was, as usual, good. He gets better every issue, though his stories are gradually degenerating. (*How's that again?—Ed.*) De Pina returns with a pretty fair adventure yarn. Ditto for Jones. Walton, Geier, and Garson also contribute good yarns, as short stories go. *Quest on Phoebe* (Phoebe who?) was lousy, which is an overstatement. Art this time is okay except for the pictures. Best one is on page 32. Newcomer Napoli on double-spread is o.k. but he gets too involved. (Look who's talking.) Suggestion to Vestal: DROP DEAD. Cover is good WHAT? TWO GOOD COVERS STRAIGHT? Payne must have been asleep to allow that to happen. No doubt there will be about 100,000,000 cute (?) remarks concerning the pink patch on the otherwise green BEM's knee, so our hero will refrain from comment on said subject.

And now with the dull stuff out of the way, Clements turns, to the delight of every fan, to the part that every one reads first, the spinal column of old P. S., the VIZIGRAPH. The absence of Chad is somewhat compensated for by a letter from His Majesty, Josephus Kennedy. Give the boy an original.

I always get a kick out of the morons who write in panning the fans, the editor, the writers and everybody else concerned with your mag in hopes that the fans will all jump on him and will keep his name in the Viz for months to come. This started Buchanan, and these other slobbering idiots, such as Meade and Snedecker, have followed up. Meade practically admits that this is what he wants in his letter. To these rather obnoxious specimens of humanity I make the following comment: If you guys can't keep your names out of the Viz without discomfort, then why don't you trying writing really GOOD letters such as those written by Chaddo and Joke. I doubt very much if you have the intelligence to write a constructive letter. To you I offer the same advice that I gave to artist Vestal.

Before closing I'd better rate the letters. As I stated earlier, first place goes to the anecdote (JoKe, that is), second to Oberfield, and third to Wheaton.

Because I can't think of an original ending I'll just say s'long.

JACK CLEMENTS

HATES THE MORONS

RFD No. 1,
East Greenbush, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

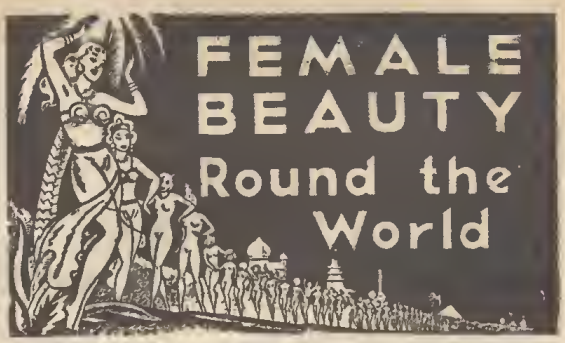
Hey, there, Lingering Psychosis, come out from under that desk and listen. I always introduce myself before I shoot.

Behold, sub-etheric warps (Meade, please note) begin to szimmer and out of the Black Void of interplanetary Space zooms Marion the Mad Martian . . . from one PLANET to another with a few thoughts on the Summer Ish.

Lets get it over with painlessly. The cover (yes, I said COVER) was swell, though not as good as the SPRING one. Why in Space don't you list the artist on the title page? Was it Anderson again? (*Yup—Ed.*)

On to the stories.

Mo-Sanshon! was the best in the issue. Aside from the fact that quite naturally I like to hear Earthmen abuse my home planet, that guy Wal-



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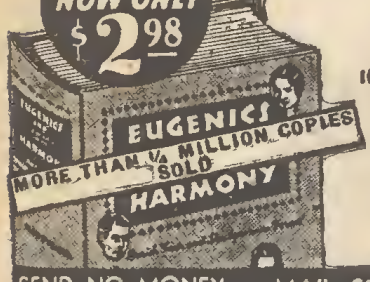

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ton really has something. Some of his ideas, such as torture by sound, are extremely ingenious. And I confess that the twist at the end came as a complete surprise . . . though on reading it a second time I realized that he practically gave it away in the first few pages. (*It's the first time that counts. —Ed.*)

Second place goes to Garson for the *Little Pets,* one of the best mind-battle stories I've ever read. However, it seems odd that ordinary booze could kill the "little pets." (*Yeah. It's different here, isn't it?—Ed.*)

The other two shorts were very, very nice. . . . I hope we see a lot more of Geier in the future. *The Venus Evil* was clever and, I think, unique. *Quest on Phoebe* has a very old plot, but I don't think I've ever seen it so well handled.

Fox's story would have led the issue if it hadn't been so full of "tough guy" writing. The IDEA was great. The two novelettes trail along in the rear somewhere . . . not really bad, just not good enough to remember. They are the kind of thing I like to read once, then have a hard time remembering.

Napoli drew both the best and the worst pics in the issue . . . pages 23 and 2 respectively. Page 23 looks like a Finlay I saw once; page 2 looks like nothing on Earth. Did YOU ever try carrying a fem at that insane angle? I'll bet that Thor didn't, either.

May I make two requests? Get Jack Vance to write for you. And bring back Ruby-more, PLANET'S jewel . . . more and more and more. I also believe an occasional fantastic would be appreciated.

On to La Vizigraph. Egad! Where is Coswal? Where is Chad? Where is Rick . . . . oh, there you are, Sneary! I can't believe my eyes! A literate, readable letter! So the Hermit is no more? What didja do, Payne ole man? I see JoKennedy is back . . . but where is my Latin pal Bradley? He might have written in and told, at least, how that machine worked out. (You know, I helped him build it.)

One request I make on bended Martian knees. DON'T, PLEEZ, print any more letters like Meade's and Wigodsky's. After all it is the fans who *like* PLANET that keep it going. I'LL be glad to welcome any one who wants to debate Einstein with me, but not in La Viz, please.

My votes for Pix. First place to . . . whoosit . . . PLP. Poor Little Paul, The Persecuted Literary Pulpster, looks like a Promising Letter Pounder. Runner up Lin Carter for an amusing gem (what? no poem?) and third place . . . well, let Sneary have it. That letter was good news to everybody. Send the one on page 75 to Wigodsky . . . no. No. That's too horrible for even him.

In conclusion . . . keep up the Present Literary Plane and you'll silence even such Sad Hacks as Meade and Snedeker.

Having rounded my orbit, once more the Mad Martian raises a trusty atom gun and leaving the editor in Payne on the PLANET'S floor jumps in and szimmers off into Space in an Emulsion Propulsion Rocket ship.

Fantastically yours,

MARION ZIMMER

(*And that's all we have room for this time, chilluns. See you in the next ish!—Ed.*)

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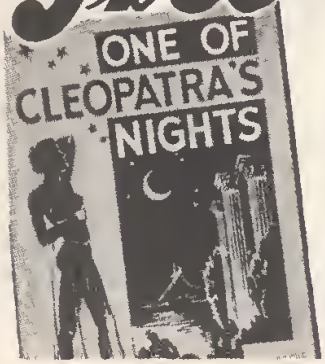

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